



What Comes After by OdoMango

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Summary: What happens after the Battle of Starcourt? How does the Party cope with what happened? How do they move forward with their lives after so much of it was shattered? How will everyone continue to grow and develop with High School, love, puberty, loss, and temptation just around the corner? This is my version of it. Rated M for language, alcohol and substance use, and sexual themes.

1. Chapter 1

Hello and welcome. If you are new to this fic, thanks for clicking it. I'm actually writing this passage here at the time of releasing chapter 18, but I'd like to get this fic some more attention if possible. Chances are if your clicking on it, your either new, or someone who clicked on it before, and lost interest and left it, but is now coming back.

In any situation, this is a fic that focuses on EVERYTHING that happens after season 3, up to season 4, as I imagine it. There is no cap. There is no limit. My long term goal is to stick with this fanfic until the release of season 4, at which point I'll make a fic for What Comes After Season 4. I plan to write about how the gang copes with the loss of their loved ones, puberty, drugs, alcohol, El moving, coming of age, starting high school, angst, cheating (?), stress, emotion, drama, the whole bit. I have a bunch of ideas about what to cover in this story, so if you are interested in any of that I strongly urge you to read ahead. I'm at 65000 words at the time of writing this; as you could have guessed, this number is going to increase by a lot. So if you are looking for a long fic that's going to be updated somewhat regularly for the foreseeable future, I once again encourage you to sit back and give this story a try.

Anyway, thank you for listening to me ramble this long. I'll let you start reading :)

The rain came down on the pavement of the parking lot like waves of cold bullets. The constant spray of the water was growing to be annoying, especially considering the fact that she was nervous beyond comprehension. Hopper and Joyce were still not back. She sat on the tailgate of the ambulance, leaning her head against Mike's shoulder, her hand under his on her lap.

The throbbing in her forehead had died down, thanks to the paramedics that had cleaned it and bandaged it. They had told her she would need stitches, but she didn't know what stitches were. She didn't bother asking Mike. As of now, she was enjoying the quietness between them. There had been enough noise for the both of them in

the last couple of hours.

She felt the back of her hand being rubbed by Mike's thumb. "They'll be back," he told her, with a small smile. "Dustin told me that Russian base was really far down. They're on their way right now."

El nodded her head and forced a smile, but with every second that ticked by, her stomach became more and more heavy, and she almost felt like crying just from the stress of it. She needed Hopper.

She needed her Dad.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Will jump out from the back of the ambulance beside them. He started running, and El followed him with her eyes until he crashed into the arms of Joyce. A wave of relief washed over her. They were back.

"They're back," El said. "Let me find Hopper."

"Okay, I'll wait here," Mike replied, but not after letting go of her hand. El smiled, and heaved herself onto her legs. The throbbing in her head started to pick up, but she ignored it. She walked through the parking lot, gazing around to find him.

She didn't seem him.

Almost immediately, panic started to set in. Where was he? She started to pace around the area more frantically, trying to ignore all the pain that was coursing through her veins. She turned to face Will and Joyce, who were still tightly holding one another. Her eyes met with Joyce's, and Joyce looked back at her.

She saw her hiccup, and a tear rolled down her cheek, still holding eye contact with her.

That's when she realized it.

Dad was gone.

For the first moment, it was like her brain didn't fully comprehend what was going on. Like her mind had figured out what was happening, but her heart was lagging behind. Then she could feel it,

an overwhelming sense of sadness and grief and anger and heartbreak and sorrow and sickness that she had never felt before. It was like a plague was eating at her insides, tearing through her heart and flesh and every cell in her body, all at the same time. All the background noise seemed to fade away, and all she could hear was her own screaming thoughts.

Then the tears came, like acid running down her face. And the acid burned her, it burned her skin and everything underneath her skin, and the burning came across her body until she started to feel her legs weaken, and she was falling. She collapsed on her knees in front of her, and screamed. Screamed louder than she had ever screamed before.

Before she knew it, Mike was in front of her, and she lunged forward and grabbed him like he was the only thing in the universe. He didn't talk, he didn't even make a sound, he just held her. Held her tight. And El squeezed him back, to the point that she thought she would suffocate him. And she buried her face into the crook of his neck and cried, harder and more profusely than she thought was even humanly possible. Mike never let go.

She heard footsteps behind her, and all around her. She didn't bother to look up. She knew she was being watched, and she knew that the people who were there were probably thinking she was pathetic and weak, and that just made her cry harder, and she gripped Mike even more. One of her hands found its way to the back of his head, and she dug her fingertips into his bushy hair. In the past, the sensation of it had comforted her, but this time it didn't.

Around her body she felt a blanket of arms wrap around her, shielding her from the cold hard rain that was pelting down on her.

Mike looked up, and saw everyone around them. Lucas, Dustin and Will. Max. Murray and Joyce. Jonathan and Nancy. Even Steve and Robin. The entire group enveloped them, and it was a long time before they any of them let go. It had been at least five minutes, and El was still sobbing uncontrollably into Mike's neck. He looked up when Steve and Robin got up. Steve placed a hand on El's shoulder, let it rest there for a moment, and then walked away with Robin. Murray then got up, along with Joyce. They exchanged a hug which

they shared for a long time. Joyce looked down at the kids, who were the only ones still locked in the embrace.

Joyce took a long, shaky breath and spoke.

"Guys, we gotta go." No one replied to her. "We can all go back to my house, but we need to get out of the rain and let the firemen do their jobs. We're going to get sick if we stay out here."

Without saying anything, Dustin, Lucas, Will and Max stood up. Mike and El remained on the wet pavement. Mike looked up, and saw Joyce. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she looked weak and defeated. Her eyes met Mike's, as if pleading. Mike understood.

He patted the back of El's head once. "C'mon, El. We should go. We're gonna go back to the Will's house." El didn't reply.

"I'm gonna be with you the whole time," he added. That seemed to do the trick. With her arms still wrapped around Mike, and her face still resting on his shoulder, the two simultaneously stood up, and began walking along with the rest of the party toward Joyce's car. With Joyce leading the group, they advanced across the puddly pavement. El and Mike trailed behind. Mike wrapped his right arm around El's shoulders, and El kept her head down, still sniffing. Mike knew even though she had stopped fully crying, he was going to have to be there for her when they got back to Will's house.

They started to get in the car, but they realized that not all of them would fit. Then they heard a voice behind them. "Mom, I can take some of them." Mike turned and saw Jonathan standing behind him, beside Nancy. The party exchanged glances, silently deciding who was going to go in which car. Mike knew that there was no way in hell that he would be sitting anywhere other than with El. And Mike knew that as much as Max and El were good friends, Max's brother had just been murdered in the most terrible way possible, and she would want to be with Lucas. So that left Will going with his Mom, along with El and Mike; and Dustin, Lucas and Max with Jonathan.

"Me and El will go with the Joyce," he said. "You guys can go with Jonathan. Will will probably want to go with us, too." Everyone else nodded, and moved toward their respective vehicles.

Will hopped into the passenger seat, and Mike and El took the backseat. El immediately slid over in the seat so as to be as close as possible to Mike. Mike wrapped his arm around her body, and leaned his against hers, which was resting on his shoulder. Mike glanced over at his girlfriend...no, ex girlfriend, and saw more fresh tears running down her face. They were silent tears.

Perhaps against his better judgement, because, technically speaking, they were still broken up, he tilted his head downward and sideways and kissed the top of her head.

El would have been lying if she said Mike kissing her head hadn't surprised her. They were still "broken up," even though she still didn't quite understand what that meant. But since that day, they had shared many intimate and intense moments together, and if she was honest, she didn't feel like there was any difference between them. Being broken up only made things seem slightly awkward, which she didn't like.

But she also would have been lying if she had said that Mike giving her that sweet yet simple gesture didn't make her feel better, even if it was just a little bit. It was like the warmth from the action had spread through her body, like a small spark that had the potential to light a fire in her soul. But the spark wasn't strong enough for her, not right now. So she just leaned into him even further and closed her eyes, letting the tears continue to drip down.

Mike looked ahead toward the road in front of them. He knew they were close to the Byers'. He exhaled deeply, and reached over with his other hand and started to stroke El's messy strands of hair. He didn't know why, he just knew that it something he did whenever she was upset. He didn't know if it would be any help now, but he knew that he was going to do everything in his power to make sure El would get through this.

Because he loved her, loved her with all his heart. And he hadn't worked up the balls to tell her in the convenience store, and he cursed himself for it, because now he knew that there wouldn't be a good time to tell her in a long time. How could he tell her something like that when she had just lost her fucking dad? It just seemed like something that... you shouldn't say unless the other person was ready

to hear it. And he didn't think El was going to be ready to hear it for a long time.

And in spite of himself, he felt a lump start to form in the back of his throat. And even though he was telling himself it was because of El, part of the reason was Hopper. They never really got along; quite the opposite actually. They spent the better part of the last six months at each other's throats, but Mike respected him, in a weird, unshowing way. Even though Hopper had made it nearly impossible for them to share any intimate moments when he was around, and was always yelling at the to keep the door open, or giving Mike dirty looks, he could not deny the fact that he had protected El for a year and a half, and he knew that he genuinely cared about her. He saw in the way that he ruffled her hair, or gave her a hug before going to work, or kissing the top of her head when getting home in the evening. He had seen them sitting in the mall talking, just before Hopper had headed out.

How he had brushed the hair out of her face, and talked to her in such a sweet and caring way, and then after brought her in for a big bear hug. And despite the differences between them, he had even told him to be careful. It was probably the nicest thing he had ever said to him. And those were his last words to him. He was never going to hear that voice again. He felt the urge to cry come again, and he forced it back. He had to be strong for El right now, and he couldn't show the fact that he was hurting. He repeated to himself, he had to be strong.

His thoughts were interrupted when the car slowed down. He looked up and saw that they had arrived at the Byers'. Joyce and Will opened their doors and stepped out. Joyce gave a key to Will, and he went to the door to unlock it. Joyce opened the back door where El was sitting and spoke.

"Alright guys, let's go in," she said.

Without speaking, El let go of Mike's hand and slid out of the backseat. Mike followed close behind. As soon as El stood up and put all of her weight on her legs, they buckled and she started to fall forward, but out of nowhere, Mike reached his hands around her torso and caught her.

"It's okay, I got you," he whispered. And before she knew it, and arm was swept underneath her thighs and she was being carried. She didn't have the energy nor the desire to speak. She just wrapped her forearms around his neck and looked at Mike in the eyes in silent thanks. Mike looked back at her and solemnly nodded his head, and El could have sworn that she saw teardrop escape his right eye.

Behind them, Jonathan's car stopped and the rest of the group got out and made their way up the driveway to the front door. When they had all gotten inside, no one talked. They all sat in the living room. Mike was sitting in the corner of one couch, with El lying down curled up beside him with her head on his lap. At the opposite end of the couch, Dustin sat, staring off into space. On the other couch sat Lucas, who had his arm around Max's shoulders. Her eyes were red and puffy. Lucas gently rubbed her arm. Will sat beside them.

At the table in the dining room sat Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy. They were sipping on drinks, probably coffee or something that would give them a much-needed jolt. It was late, but they would have to be tending to the young children for the majority of the night in all likelihood.

El closed her eyes, and drew a shaky breath in. Her crying had subsided, but not because she was feeling better. It was just that she felt like she had completely run out of tears; all the fluid in her body had been completely drained. She was incredibly thirsty and hungry, but above all else she was exhausted. She wanted to sleep more than anything. But every time she closed her eyes, all she could see was the Mind Flayer looming over her, or Billy choking getting impaled by that fleshy tentacle, or Hopper's face as he hugged her good-bye. It was all too much. She sniffed, and Mike massaged her shoulder with one hand in response.

The silence was abruptly broken when Joyce entered the living room

"Does anyone want anything to drink? Or eat?" she asked. The party exchanged glances, knowing that all of them were feeling starved.

"Yes, please," Will replied to his Mom, who smiled and left to the kitchen. Nancy and Jonathan got up to help her. Will was about to as well, but Joyce shook her head at him and said it was okay. Will

reluctantly went back to his seat next to Mike and El.

El felt the discomfort among her friends, the awkwardness and sadness that was emanating around the room. She knew they were all feeling a million different emotions, especially her and Max, who had both just lost someone important to them. And even though they probably all wanted to talk about what had happened, everyone was too afraid to break the silence. And no one knew what to say, and neither did she. She just wanted to wake up in her bed at the cabin and walk into the kitchen and see Hopper, as if this was all just a bad dream.

Joyce interrupted her thoughts when she came into the room along with Nancy and Jonathan. They were carrying toast and several boxes of different kinds of cereal, along with bowls and small plates. They made a second trip and brought in some glasses of water and a jug of milk.

"There's more milk in the fridge," she said as she put down a jug of on the coffee table in front of them. "Sorry for the lack of choice, I haven't gone grocery shopping since last week."

"It's okay, Mom," Will responded, with a small smile.

Joyce pulled up a chair from the dining table and sat on it with the rest of the kids. She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. El knew that her Dad and Joyce were close, and she realized that Joyce was probably feeling some of what she was feeling as well. It made her feel a little bit better that she wasn't the only one who was going through it.

They ate their food in silence. The only sounds that could be heard were the slurping of drinks and crunching of cereal. When they were done, which didn't take long, Joyce spoke.

"Jonathan and Nancy have gone to bed," Joyce stated. "We should probably try to get some rest as well." The idea was met with murmurs of agreement among the teens. "It's up to you guys where you sleep. We have these couches, Will's bed, my bed, and I can grab an air mattress from the storage room for you guys to crash on."

"Mom, I can sleep with you," Will said. "Two people can take my bed."

"I'll crash on this couch," Dustin announced, tapping the cushion next to him, beside Lucas and Max. Max leaned sideways and said something to Lucas that El didn't quite catch. Lucas nodded, and turned to Joyce.

"It is okay if me and Max take an air mattress in the living room?" he asked. Even though Joyce was slightly skeptical about the boys and girls mixing, she knew that under the circumstances, anything sexual was far from their minds. Plus, the boys needed to be there to comfort their girlfriends. So she gave them the benefit of the doubt and nodded.

"So can El and I take Will's bed?" asked Mike.

"Yes."

At this, El smiled a little bit. Despite what she was feeling, spending the night with her boyfriend- or ex boyfriend- sounded nice. Maybe it would help with the possible nightmares that might come. But just snuggling with him under warm covers after everything that had happened sounded almost heavenly.

"We only have a couple extra pairs of clothes for you guys to sleep in, though. And the clothes you're wearing now look disgusting."

Mike produced a dry laugh at this. The gash on his face had been cleaned up, but before that it had bled all over his clothes. On top of that, an ungodly amount of sweat had drenched his clothes left him with more to be desired.

"It's okay, Mom. I have some clean boxer shorts the guys can throw on."

Joyce mentally sighed, knowing that now the boys were going to be sleeping with their girlfriends in nothing but underwear. But she decided not to press the issue.

"Okay, I probably have some extra pajamas in my bedroom for Max and El, just...give me a second to find some," she said, walking out of

the room. Will gave Dustin a blanket and pillow to sleep with, and some more sleeping gear to Max and Lucas. They all thanked him.

After getting the air mattress pumped up, everyone got settled and made their way to their respective sleeping areas. Lucas and Max pulled their mattress a little bit farther away from Dustin than where Joyce had put it, and fluffed up the sheets and got tucked in.

Mike walked into Will's bedroom, and smiled in spite of himself. He remembered spending a lot of time here with Will six months ago, when he was a host to the Mind Flayer. All the posters and photographs gave him a wave of nostalgia. Maybe Will was right about them growing up. For a moment, he remembered their life of playing games in his basement, just the four guys, not a care in the world. He missed that.

El came into the bedroom, her eyes no longer red. She had washed her face, and replaced the bandage that was on her forehead. She was changed into short shorts and baggy, light blue t-shirt that hung at practically her thighs.

She looked beautiful.

"You okay?" Mike asked.

She shrugged, and remained silent. "C'mon," he said, sitting up and gesturing with a nod for her to come to the bed.

"Which side do you-" and suddenly El was hugging him, her arms tightly wrapped around his torso, her head resting on his chest. Mike hugged her back, and leaned his cheek to rest on the top of her head. They stayed in that tight embrace for a while, until El finally let go. She crawled into the bed, and Mike walked around to the other side. He slipped off shirt, and, already in the shorts Will had given to him, crawled into bed with her.

They lay together, about two inches apart, parallel to one another. Mike didn't close his eyes. He just stared at the ceiling, thinking about what he should say, or if he should even say anything. Luckily, El decided for him when she spoke for the first time in hours.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you..." she trailed off. She turned in the bed to look at him, and he turned back to meet her eyes.

"What is it?" Mike asked her.

She looked away for a moment, and then back at him. She grabbed his forearm and pulled it toward herself, and wrapped it around her body. She shifted closer to him, her back still facing him, and before Mike knew it they were spooning. His arm tucked behind her neck, curled up around her head, his hand in her hair. His other arm found its way around her stomach, his fingers lightly dancing on her bare skin where her shirt had folded upward slightly.

"Just...hold me."

And he did.

2. Chapter 2

It had been over an hour, and Max still was not sleeping. Even though she was utterly exhausted, she couldn't manage to calm down her mind. All she could think about was Billy. Every time she tried to close her eyes, all she could see was her brother, lying in a pool of his own crimson blood, whispering those words to her. *I'm sorry*. She blinked salty tears out of her eyes, and sniffed.

"Max?" It was Lucas. He was awake too.

"Yeah?" she replied. Lucas was quiet for a moment.

"I, uhh.." he meandered. "I just...I was gonna ask if you were okay, but, I know you're not."

Max didn't say anything, but Lucas continued talking anyway. "I'm here for you, and... and I want to help. I don't know what you're exactly what you're feeling, because I've never been there...but I know it's not good, and, just...tell me if you need anything, anything at all. I'm here."

As unceremonious as his words were, Max was touched. All she had done for the last forty-eight hours was bash Lucas and Mike, and despite all of that, Lucas was still here, comforting her as if nothing had even happened between them.

"I don't know why I'm upset," she started. "He was such a terrible person the whole time he's been in my life. But after El went into the void, and reminded me of that memory of his, it made me realize that maybe the whole time he was just...hurting. He was just in pain, the whole time."

"Obviously, deep down he was a good person," Lucas responded. "Look at what he did for El. He threw himself right in front of the Mindflayer, just to protect her."

"I know, I know, and then..." she started to break down again. "God, I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me."

Lucas grabbed her hand with both of his and shifted on his side to look at her.

"Hey," he soothed. "Nothing is wrong with you. It's gonna be okay, it's all over now." He leaned into her and hugged her, and Max reciprocated. Lucas gently stroked the hair on the back of her head, slowly easing her into a state of calmness. When they broke apart, Lucas laid back down on his back. Max rested her head on Lucas's chest, her wrapped her arms around his abdomen. Lucas reached out with his fingers and tenderly caressed Max's cheek.

Max could not even wrap her head around how Lucas was being so nice about Billy and patient with her. Considering the fact that Billy hated him, and was racist, and had nearly killed him at the Byers' six months ago.

"He almost killed you last year," Max said. "Why are you being so..."

"Because," he interrupted. "It's not his fault. You've told me before about your stepdad. If he's lived with him his whole life, then there's no question about why he is the way he is. You're right. He was just hurting."

Max looked up at Lucas, and brought her lips to his mouth. She let them stay there for a few seconds, moving gently across his. She pulled away.

"Thanks, Stalker."

Lucas gave her a small smile. "You're welcome, Madmax."

El woke up, and immediately felt Mike's body wrapped around hers. The sensation made her feel safe and warm inside, and she smiled.

But then the events of last night came over her like a wave of ice cold water, and the smile slid off her face instantly. She wasn't in her cabin, and Hopper wasn't in the kitchen. She wasn't going to leave the room and have Eggos with her dad. She wasn't going to spend the whole day in her cozy bedroom making out with Mike to the mixtape he had made her. She wasn't going to do any of that. Because her home was destroyed, and her Dad was gone.

She felt a lump rise in her throat and she didn't even try to hide it. Her body shook, and the tears came unwillingly from her eyes. She grabbed Mike's hand and squeezed it, but a little bit harder than she had meant, because then he woke up. His eyes opened slowly, and saw El. He immediately came to her aid and brushed the hair out her face.

"Shhh, it's okay," he comforted her. "It's okay."

"I'm...sorry," she hiccuped.

"Shh, no. Why are you sorry? Don't be sorry for anything."

"I woke you up," she sniffed, wiping her eyes.

"No, it's okay, it's late anyways. Don't worry."

Silence descended upon them, the only noise being El's quiet sobs.

"I miss him," she said, between tears.

"I know," Mike replied sadly. "Me too."

El sat up, and shifted into a cross legged position. Mike did the same, so that they were sitting across from one another. El's gaze met Mike's, and wiped her eyes again. "Why?" she asked.

"What?" Mike replied, an incredulous look on his face.

"Why do you miss him?" El repeated.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You guys hated one another. Hopper was always yelling at you, and you always told me that he didn't want us to be happy. You didn't like him, I know it."

Mike felt his heart sink. Everything that El said was true. And he couldn't take any of it back. He couldn't even count how many times he had insulted Hopper behind his back, or gave him attitude. And he couldn't change that. But he wasn't lying when he said that now he was gone, he felt a hole in his heart that would never be filled; a hole

that could only be filled by Hopper.

"I know but...now that he's gone, I guess that I've realized something," he said, looking down at his feet.

"What?"

Mike fiddled at his watch, knowing that he had a lot of things to say. But he wasn't quite sure how to say all of it. He exhaled and just decided to start speaking. "I know that I didn't really give him much respect, but now that he's not around anymore, I kind of...regret it. I know that he loved you, and I know that he was like...he was a father to you. And he protected and cared for you, and put a roof over your head for a year and a half, which is much more than what I gave you."

Mike started to tear up, and silently cursed himself. He was supposed to be comforting El, and he couldn't do that if he was a crying mess. But he still had more to say, so he continued anyway.

"Maybe if I had just been nicer to him, he would have been nicer to me. I was always rolling my eyes, or talking back to him, and I was just...such an asshole. And I don't even know why. I just wanted to spend time with you, alone, and not have him snooping on us. But he was just concerned for you the whole time, and I guess he knows about horny teenagers and their thoughts. And now that I'm thinking about it..."

El looked at him, her eyebrows raised.

"I just want to talk to him, and hear his voice again. I want to tell him I'm sorry."

At this, Mike finally felt his emotions overcome him. He felt himself start to cry. "Fuck, El, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be acting like this, you're the one who-"

"Mike," El interrupted him.

"Yeah?"

"It's okay. Hopper felt the same way about you," she said, smiling

bittersweetly.

"He did?"

"Yes," she told him, taking his hand. "I remember a conversation we had, one day."

Mike readjusted himself, and sat closer to El. "What was it about?"

"It was the start of June," she sighed. "You had just left the cabin, and it was because he had yelled at us for having the door closed."

"I remember. He opened the door and saw me on top of you."

"Yes," she nodded. "He took us to the living room, and he said, 'Just keep the door open!' and you said, 'Why? What are we gonna do?' and he just looked at you. Then you walked out of the house."

Mike bit on his lip, vividly recalling that argument. And he was kicking himself for being such a fucking dick to Hopper. "Yeah," he said, rubbing his face. "Those are the kinds of things I regret."

"Well," El continued. "After you left, I asked him why he didn't want the door to be closed. And he looked at me...strange. And said that sometimes, when two people care about each other a lot, they do certain things together."

Mike blushed, fully aware of what Hopper had been talking about. "And I asked him what he was talking about, but he told me he'd tell me later. But then I realized what he had said. He said 'When two people care about each other, sometimes they do things together.' So I asked him."

"Asked him what?"

"If he thought that you cared about me."

"And what did he say?"

"He said, 'Of course he cares about you. I know he does. And I care about him.'"

Mike's eyes widened, and felt himself smile a little bit at this.

"He said that he just wished that you were nicer to him. And that he wanted to be nicer to you, but it was hard for him because he didn't really know how."

"Oh," Mike said. A million thoughts were rushing through his brain all at once. He felt happy that even though Hopper seemed to hate him, he actually did care about him, and wanted to be nice but just didn't know how.

But he also was pissed at himself, pissed for being such a stupid fucking teenager for six months when he could have just been more respectful to Hopper.

"Thanks for telling me that, El," Mike said almost fully in tears. El nodded and Mike leaned in to grab her with his arms. El grabbed him back, and the two fell on their sides on the bed, still clinging to one another. And they cried.

"I wish he was here," Mike said. "Even if he just came back to yell at me."

"Me too," El replied, letting out a small chuckle through her crying.

Mike was feeling a lot of things in that moment, but he felt one above all of them. He wanted to tell El that he loved her. It was something that he felt like he had to say, he just wanted her to know so badly. But it wasn't a good time to drop the L word, not right now. So he settled for something a little less.

"Thanks, El," Mike breathed.

"For what?" she asked.

"For just...being here."

El smiled. "Thank you, too."

El broke away from the hold, and looked Mike in his eyes. "What's wrong?" Mike asked. El's eyes flicked down to his lips, and felt an urge come over her. She didn't fight it.

She brought herself forward quickly and latched her mouth onto Mike's bottom lip. She held herself there for a moment, and went to pull away because she sensed discomfort from Mike. But as she moved backward, he came forward and leaned into her. She lay on the bed, guiding him to her as she did so. He lay into her, putting nearly all his weight onto her body.

Their lips continued to dance together, slow and gentle. El moved her hand to the back of Mike's neck, the ends of his hair brushing her fingertips. She ran her hands through it, and as she did so, everything that had happened yesterday seemed to fade away.

Fueled by her emotions and the euphoria of the kiss, she grew hungrier, and she opened her mouth a little more and let her tongue run across Mike's mouth. He granted her access, and opened his as well, and their tongues met in the middle. The feeling made her crazy.

She moaned into the kiss, grabbing his head with both of her hands and pulling him even closer to her. Mike ran his hand along her body, starting at her knees and up her thigh, around her hip and toward her armpit, and ended at her shoulder.

"Hey, guys, my Mom made..." Mike sprang off of El and turned to the doorway, where he saw Will standing. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to, um...interrupt you."

"It's okay," Mike said, slightly disappointed that Will had broken their moment. "What's going on?"

"My Mom has breakfast."

"Okay, we'll come out in a second," Mike said.

He turned back to El, who was still looking at him. "Mike?" she asked.

"Yeah?"

"Are we still..." she began, looking at her feet. "Are we still broken up?" Mike drew a sharp breath in. If he was honest, he had completely forgotten about that in the last twenty-four hours. "I, um...I don't know."

"I don't want to be anymore," she said rather loudly, and with confidence. Mike was taken aback by her abruptness. "No?" he echoed.

"No," she said again. "I want you to be my boyfriend again."

Mike smiled. "I want that too."

He then grabbed her hand and kissed the top of it. "I want you to be my girlfriend again."

El grinned, and kissed him. This one was short and sweet, but made him feel butterflies in his stomach all the same. She pulled away, and received a kiss on her forehead.

"Let's go get some breakfast."

It was noon when they walked into the dining room. They were met by the rest of the party, along with Jonathan and Nancy on the couch in the living room. Joyce saw them and smiled.

"Hey, guys," she greeted. "Sleep okay?"

"Yeah, we were good," Mike replied.

"I went and got some groceries, we have lots of stuff for breakfast. Take what you want."

"Thank you, Mrs Byers," Mike said politely. Him and El walked toward the table where Will, Lucas, Dustin and Max were sitting. They had all helped themselves to toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon.

"Is there any Eggos?" El asked.

"Yes, we have some in the freezer, sweetie. I'll toast them for you."

"Thank you," El said.

Her and Mike pulled up chairs and sat with the rest of the party, but not after helping themselves to some eggs and pouring some milk. Dustin was the first to speak. "How are you guys feeling? Was the bed nice?" he asked with a hint of humour. Mike glared at him.

"Yeah, it was nice," Mike said.

"What about the rest of you guys?" he inquired.

"The air mattress was surprisingly comfy. We had a good night," Lucas said, to which Max agreed. "Me too," Will pitched in. Dustin gave a nod in response, taking a massive bite of his toast as he did so.

When the group had finally finished eating, Joyce had already left the house. She told the group that she was going to run some errands, probably something to do with Hopper, planning his funeral or something. Jonathan and Nancy had also left the house; they had gone to work to see if they were able to get their jobs back.

Max and Lucas got up and moved to the living room, and sat on the couch together. The rest of the party moved toward the room to join them. They sat in silence for a few moments before Mike spoke.

"So what are we gonna do?" he asked. The rest of the room sighed.

"I don't know," Will said, rubbing his eyes. "This all feels like...a dream that I haven't woken up from yet."

"I wish it was," El whispered.

"Me too," Max said.

"Our parents are probably worried shitless," Dustin pointed out.

"Oh, fuck!" Mike and Lucas said at the same time, eyes widening. "Shit!"

"Will, can we use your phone?" Mike asked.

"Yeah, it's in the kitchen."

The three boys moved toward the kitchen, and Dustin called first.

"Hi Mom... yes, I- no, it's fine, I'm alright. I was just at, uh, Mike's. His phone was down, I'm...yes, I'm sorry, I wanted to call you but...no, we weren't at the mall when the fire happened," he said, pursing his lips tightly. "Okay, yes, I know. I'll be home soon. Okay."

Bye...yes. Bye."

He hung up the phone, and walked over to the couch and collapsed. "Jesus Christ," he huffed. "I'm gonna be grounded for so long."

"Okay, give me the phone," Lucas muttered, preparing himself for the scolding that would ensue. "Hi mom," he said into the receiver. "Yeah, I'm sorry I didn't call, I spent the last couple nights at Mike's house, their phone was dead so I couldn't call..."

He continued talking for a few more moments. When he hung up, he sighed. "Okay, she was a lot nicer about it than I thought she was gonna be."

"Wish I could say the same," Dustin grunted, running his hands through his uncombed mop of curls.

"Alright, let me call," Mike said.

After spending a few moments on the phone with his Mom, telling her that he had spent the night at Will's, he got off with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. His Mom told him to come home immediately, and that they would take more later.

"I gotta get home," Mike announced.

"Yeah, us too," the boys agreed.

"Max, don't you wanna call you Mom?" Lucas asked.

"No, it's fine," she replied. "I'd rather just talk to them when I get home."

The party gathered up their things, and headed to the front door. "Are you guys gonna be okay?" Will asked, wondering if it would be good for his friends to leave.

"Yeah, we'll be fine," Mike said. "El will come home with me, we'll just hang out in my basement."

"I'm under house arrest anyway," Dustin said. "I'm gonna head straight back. I'm in deep shit I think." The remark was met by pitiful

laughs among the teens.

"Max, do you want to come home with me? My parents won't mind."

Max had been at Lucas's house many times; his parents were more accepting of the fact that she was a different race than them. If she was to bring Lucas over to her house, she knew her Mom would be okay with it. But her step dad wouldn't, and she didn't want to make her Mom lie to him. That wouldn't be fair to her. So, knowing that she would be greeted with open arms in Lucas's house, she smiled.

"That would be great," she replied thankfully.

"Alright, then, let's go," Duston said, clapping his hands together. Dustin reached toward Will and gave him a hearty hug. "Thanks for everything, Will. And thank your Mom for us too. She's amazing."

"I will," Will replied with a grin.

Lucas and Max said their good-byes to everyone and headed out, leaving El, Mike and Will standing in front of the open door.

"El, I'll be out in a minute, just, could you wait outside?" Mike asked. El nodded. She walked out and closed the door on her way.

"What's going on?" Will asked.

Mike inhaled deeply, then blew it all out. "I, uh, just wanted to say that..." he started. "I'm sorry. For everything."

"What do you mean?" he asked him, as a questioning look swept across his face.

"I've been a real asshole to you. With the D and D game, and about El, and I just...I feel terrible. You're a great friend, and I don't want that to stop. And, the campaign you wrote was really cool, but I was just thinking about El, and how she broke up with me, and-"

"Mike," Will interrupted him. "It's okay. I was being unfair too."

"No, I was the one who was being a dick. I completely shut all of you guys out, and I shouldn't have. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, but the girl you love disappeared for almost a year. You deserved to make up that lost time with her. There's more to life than games. I've realized that now." This comment was met with a flustered Mike.

"I don't...I don't love her, Will, I..."

"Mike," he said, with a knowing look in his eyes. "Yes, you do. I've seen it. We all have."

Mike was shocked to hear this. He didn't realize that his feelings were so apparent.

"Look," Will continued. "Maybe we both screwed up a little bit. But I forgive you. You deserve to be happy, but maybe just don't completely forget about us," he said with a slight, teasing smile.

"It's okay, I forgive you. And I'm sorry too. I promise I'll try to spend some more time with you guys."

"Good," Will said.

"Maybe...we can play D and D sometime soon?" Mike suggested.

"Yeah," Will replied. "I'd like that."

Mike pulled will into a hug, which he reciprocated. Will patted Mike on the back affectionately. When they separated, Mike stretched out his hand. "Shake?" he asked.

"Shake."

3. Chapter 3

Jonathan and Nancy walked out of the Hawkin's Post Office, bummed out and defeated. After trying to negotiate with the new boss that was there-in place of Tom- they had walked out with no success in getting their jobs back. They were quite surprised that they even had anyone there to fill the spot so quickly but they supposed they had an assistant on hand. Alas, Bruce's and Tom's jokes about them had washed through the whole office, and no one wanted them to be there. So, after getting laughed at and ridiculed, they had walked out.

They stepped into the car, and Nancy cursed. "Sons of bitches," she huffed loudly.

"Hey," Jonathan said quietly. "Did you really expect them to let us back on?"

"Maybe...I don't know. With Tom gone, I guess that I thought that maybe there was a chance."

They knew that Tom had been flayed, and had been killed in the hospital along with Bruce. And even if they had somehow survived that, they knew that there was no way they could have survived after the gate was closed and the Mind Flayer was killed. Nancy realized at that point there were probably hundreds of people who had been flayed, and they had all died. And on top of that, for each person that had died, dozens of their family members and friends would be affected by it. She would be seeing shit all over the paper and news any day now, about the fire in the mall, and all the people that had been killed, including the town's chief of police.

She must have zoned out for too long, because then she heard Jonathan's voice enter her ears. "Hey," he said. "Are you okay? Is there anything else bothering you, or is it just this thing?"

"Sorry, I just, was, um...nothing, it was nothing, I was just thinking."

Jonathan started the car and got onto the road. "About what?" he asked. There was a lapse in their conversation while Nancy collected he thoughts. "Nance?" Jonathan pressed.

"All the people that died, all the flayed. They're all gone. All of them. There must have been hundreds of people in that thing, and they're all gone."

Jonathan sighed and visibly gripped the steering wheel tighter. "Yeah, I've been thinking about that too."

"How on Earth are they gonna cover something like that up?" Nancy wondered aloud.

"I don't know, but it's not our responsibility," Jonathan replied with a chuckle. "I guess we'll see what they come up with. That scientist guy my Mom took Will to last year will probably think of something."

"Who?"

"I don't know, his name is Dr Owen or something. Pretty sure he's still around."

"Ah."

Jonathan turned at the intersection and continued down the road. "Whatever it is, we'll be seeing a lot of in the news pretty soon," he pointed out. "Guess we'll just have to wait and see." Jonathan felt a pang of hunger in his gut. "You want to grab a bite to eat?" he asked.

"Yeah, that sounds nice."

Joyce walked into Will's room and found him lying bed, looking at the ceiling. One of the mixtapes Jonathan had made him was bouncing off the walls from the speakers of the radio on his desk.

"Hey," she said. "How you doing?"

Will glanced her eyes over to his Mom, and sat up in his bed. "Back from your errands?"

Joyce sat down beside him and rubbed his leg. "Yeah," she said. "I just went to...I went to the police station. Wanted to see what was going on about Hopper, if they had maybe found a body, or anything."

"Did they?"

"No," she sighed, sadness flashing across her face. "But I had a feeling they wouldn't, I just wanted to make sure, in case I missed something." Joyce got up to leave the room, but Will stopped her.

"Mom?" he asked suddenly.

Joyce turned around to face her young son. "What...what happened last night with you guys? You never told me."

Joyce's face went blank, and her eyes lost focus. She looked at the floor. Will immediately felt bad. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked. Never mind."

"No, it's okay, sweetie, you should know," his Mom sighed, returning to the foot of Will's bed to talk to him. "We were in the...portal room, I guess you could call it. The room with the portal. This machine had this blue light beam coming out of it," she described, using a hand gesture to indicate a long shape. "And the gate, it was...right there. This machine was drilling, or something, a hole into the wall, and there was the gate. Right there. We had both the keys, so we put them in, and were about to turn them, but then one of the Russians came in."

Will stared at her, listening intently. He wanted to know exactly what had happened to Hopper last night. During the year prior, he was almost like a father to him in some regards. He was always the one who came with Joyce to the lab for his special check-ups. It had really hurt him when he found out that Hopper had been killed. But he couldn't imagine what El was going through right now.

"The Russian, he had been chasing us for a while. He almost killed us in that old farmhouse," she recalled, to which Will's eyes widened.

"Mom," he said worriedly. "How did you get wrapped up in all of this? Why were you with Hopper?" Joyce looked at him, at a loss for words.

"Just...never mind that. We were about to turn the keys, and he came behind us and threw us both off. He was really big, and really strong.

He nearly killed Hopper three times.

"I tried to grab the gun, but he knocked me out. Him and Hopper were fighting, and they somehow ended up on the deck next to the machine, the machine that was drilling the gate. That was when I woke up. I saw them, fighting. Hopper got knocked down by him, and his head was right by the machine. I thought he was going to get decapitated," Joyce's voice cracked briefly, and her eyes started to glisten.

"Hopper was able to pull him down, and the Russian hit his head on the machine. I don't know how he didn't die right there. Hopper got up, and threw him into the machine. His body was torn to bits, and the machine, it...it malfunctioned when he threw him into the engine. Some kind of disk, of energy came out of it. It was like looked like electricity, or...I don't even know. It made some barrier, and blocked his way back.

"I was able to grab both the keys with the help of my keychain, and I knew I was able to turn them both. And I was going to, but...Hopper was still there, trapped." Joyce's pursed her lips and rubbed her eyes. "And he looked at me, from where he was standing. And he just nodded at me, and smiled. Just smiled.

"I knew what he wanted me to do. I knew what I had to do. So I looked down, and I...I turned the keys."

Will continued to sit motionless on his bed, speechless at what he had just heard. He felt his emotions start to rise up in him, but he willed them to stay hidden for just a few moments longer, enough to wrap up the conversation with his Mom. "So," he murmured. "Then what happened?"

"There was a really bright coming from the machine. So bright I couldn't even look at it when it was happening. It must have exploded, because when it finally stopped the thing had been destroyed. And I went to look, to see if maybe he was there, but...there wasn't even a body."

"Wait," Will said suddenly, sitting up from his lying down position. "There was no body?"

"No," she said. "Which was weird, because when we passed by the exit, we saw some...well," she chuckled in spite of herself through her teary eyes. "I can't even call them bodies. They were just...lumps of flesh and bones. They had been turned to mush, just like Alexei said."

Ignoring that last bit about Alexei, because he didn't know who he was and he didn't want to take the conversation off on another tangent, he had a thought. "But," Will thought aloud. "If there wasn't a body, then...then maybe he survived somehow? Maybe you just didn't see him."

Joyce considered what her son had said for a moment. Maybe he was right. Maybe he had gotten out. Maybe there was some kind of exit she didn't see. Could he have jumped through the gate?

"I don't know, sweetie," Joyce said sadly. "Maybe, but...I don't want to hold onto this. The more I think about it, the more it'll just destroy me inside. If he lived, then I hope he's okay...but I'm not gonna get my hopes up."

Will reached in to hug his Mom. She was crying now, and Will felt some tears dripping down his face as well. He had never seen his Mom in this much emotional distress about something that wasn't related to him. It made him feel terrible. He wished he could fix it all for his Mom, but he knew he couldn't do that.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," he consoled. "But he didn't die in vain. He died saving all of us. And that's how we'll remember him."

His Mom pulled away, and kissed his forehead. "Thank you, sweetie. That means a lot to me."

Mike and El arrived at Mike's house after walking for about half an hour. El's leg was still in a lot of pain, and both of them were tired in general. Mike's face was still cut from the night before, and he knew he would have to come up with a solid excuse to tell his Mom. He also had to figure out what he was going to do with El, because his Mom didn't even know who she was, let alone seen her.

In his head, Mike hatched a plan for him and El to get by his parents without raising suspicion. Mike grabbed his girlfriend's hand and

looked at her brown, beautiful eyes. He could have just become lost in them, but he had more important matters on his hands.

"Okay," he started. "Here's the plan. The backdoor to the basement is probably locked, so you're gonna wait right outside of it and wait for me to let you in. I'm gonna go through the front door, and tell my Mom that I spent the night at Will's, and the reason why I have this cut is because..." he trailed off, trying to think of something believable. There weren't many things that could give you a gash that badly, on the face of all places.

"Tell her that you fell off Will's bike?" El suggested. That excuse had crossed Mike's mind, but it seemed too simple. An easy lie that her Mom could perhaps see right through. But it was all he could think of, so he decided to go for it. "Okay," he said. "Let's see how that goes."

Just for good luck, El pulled her boyfriend down and gave him a peck on the lips. Mike smiled, and went around the house toward his front door. He tried the handle, and it was unlocked. Bracing himself for the worst, he stepped inside.

"Hello?" he called out.

His Mother walked quickly toward him from kitchen. She stopped about a meter in front of him, and crossed her arms. "What on earth is wrong with you, Michael?! No message? No note? No phone call? Nothing! Do you know how worried I've been about you?!"

Mike winced, knowing that this was going to be a rough conversation, but before he could even open his mouth to explain himself, his Mom was yelling again. "And where is Nancy? Have you heard from her either? She hasn't called me in forever, she better be with Jonatha- wait, Michael, what on earth happened to your face? Are you okay? Oh my God, sweetie..."

"Mom!" Mike interrupted. "Jesus Christ, I'm fine. I just fell off Will's bike yesterday. And I'm sorry I didn't call, Will's phone was...his phone line was down, it just got fixed when I called you. So I couldn't call you before that. Can you just...tell me what my punishment is so I can go downstairs?"

Mike's mom gave him a quizzical look. "You think I'm going to punish you?"

"Well...I mean, yeah. I didn't call you for so long, and...what, you're not?"

His Mom uncrossed her arms. "Okay. I can't really get mad at you for not calling because, *if* you are telling the truth, then you weren't able to call, and that's not your fault. But still, it's not that long of a walk. You could have just came over and told me. I've been worried sick, especially with the fire at the mall."

Mike looked at his Mom expectantly, awaiting his sentence. "You're grounded," she decided. "For...three days. Any longer, and I'll *want* you out of the house."

"Okay," Mike replied, grateful that his punishment wasn't that severe. "Thank you."

Mike left his Mom, and started to walk down the stairs to the basement. With every step there was a creak, and with every creak he became more excited to see El. He felt bad, given the circumstances, but the thought of him spending a whole day, perhaps more, completely alone with El made him really excited. And he knew El would be upset, and he would be helping and comforting her for the majority of the time, and would also probably wind up letting her cry into him at some point, but nonetheless.

He unlocked the backdoor and opened it. El wasn't there. He stepped out of the doorway and looked to his right, and saw El hiding behind the bushes in the back garden. He smiled.

"Come in," he said, to which El returned the smile and stepped into the house.

"Just leave your shoes over there," Mike said, indicating toward a rubber mat by the door. El kicked off her shoes and walked gingerly into the center of the basement. Mike followed her, and scratched the back of his neck. He took into account that she was still wearing Joyce's oversized pajamas. "Do you, um...want some nicer clothes? I can grab some."

El chuckled to herself. "What?" Mike asked, feeling a smile starting to spread to his face at the magical sound of El's light laughter.

"Nothing, this just...reminds me of that night. The first night that we met."

"How?" Mike asked.

"You gave me some dry clothes. When I was in the fort that you built me. Remember?"

Mike's heart became fuzzy at the memory. He vividly recalled the stormy evening that he had been with Dustin and Lucas, wandering around Mirkwood looking for Will. Then he had heard rustling in the bushes behind him, and his life was changed in the second after.

"I remember a lot of things from that night," Mike reminisced. "I remember hearing you running around in the trees, thinking it was a wolf or something. I couldn't have been more wrong."

El walked toward him and hugged him, digging her fingertips into his back, breathing in his scent. She closed her eyes, and ran her right palm along the length of his spine.

"My life changed so much that day, El," Mike murmured, closing his eyes and resting his chin on the top of her head. "Me too," she replied.

They stood in the center of the room, wrapped in each other's arms for a few minutes, just breathing, enjoying one another's presence. It calmed them both down from the events of the last two days. El's mind started to wonder, and she started to think of that first night again that she spent in Mike's basement. She remembered the clothes that Mike gave her when she was sitting on his couch, shivering and wet. She remembered changing in the bathroom, after almost getting naked in front of Mike's friends. She bit back a laugh at that memory. She remembered showing Mike her "011" tattoos, and how he reacted. She remembered when Mike had given her the name "El." She remembered the blanket fort that she had slept in, and then had a thought.

"Mike?" she quietly asked.

"Yeah?"

"Can we build a...a 'fort'?"

Mike looked at her with a confused face. "What?"

"That is what it is called, right? A...fort?"

Mike let go of her, and put his hands in his pockets. "I mean, yeah, we can. But why?" he said, with almost a laugh. He was fine with building a fort with El, but he wanted to know why on Earth she would want to.

"I don't know, I just...I want to lie down in one with you."

Mike's heart swelled and he grinned. "Sure, El."

Thanks for reading this chapter, sorry for the longer wait. I'm working at my own pace right now, but no more than 3 or 4 days for the next one. Please drop a review, I'm curious to see what you guys all think about the story so far.

4. Chapter 4

"Pass me that blanket, El," Mike requested, pointing to a fluffy, white piece of fabric draped on the back of the sofa. El walked toward it and passed it to Mike. He put it across the two chairs that were holding up the rest of the blankets, and realized that it was not going to be big enough for both of them.

"Hold on, let's get something else to support it. We need it bigger," he concluded.

"Okay," she replied. "What should we use?"

Mike stepped back, and put his hands on his hips. "Let's take that table, we can use that," he improvised, pointing toward the small coffee table where he played D and D with the rest of the party.

They grabbed some extra blankets and the table, and found a foldout chair in the closet. When it was all said and done, the two of them stepped back and admired their handiwork.

"Looks pretty damn good to me," Mike boasted.

"Yes," El agreed. "Damn good." Mike's lip curled when El said that. He always found it cute and endearing when El repeated him, even if she wasn't sure what it meant.

"It feels like I'm...going through the same thing again," she thought aloud, after looking at the fort.

"That's called *deja vu*," Mike said.

"What's...*deja vu*?" El inquired, looking at him with confused eyes.

"It's what people call the feeling you're having. When you feel like you're seeing or doing the same thing over again. Sometimes it even happens when you don't even remember it."

El nodded. It always made her feel happy when she learned something new from Mike. She had learned a lot from him in the past six months, especially words.

"You wanna go in?" Mike asked jubilantly.

El gave him a toothy grin and nodded her head. The two walked into the fort, hand in hand and sat down in it. Mike leaned back and put his back and head against the wall. El did the same and Mike eased his arm around her body and around her shoulders. El sighed contentedly and leaned her head against Mike's chest.

"This is nice," el said.

"Yeah," Mike agreed.

El eased herself down into a lying position, and stared at the blanket ceiling of the fort. The sight of it reminded her of her first night at Mike's house, and a whole whack of emotions poured into her soul. Even though the thought of Mike brought her happiness, her mind started to think about the other things about that night; the bad men killing Benny, running around on the painful forest floor in nothing but her bare feet. She had spent hours and hours fleeing from them, away from the lab.

And inevitably, she began to grow angry and upset, angry and upset because of her other life; it was because of the bad men that she never had a Mom, it was because of the bad men she never had a regular life, it was because of the bad men that she had gone to the void and opened the gate. And it was because of the gate that all of this had happened. The death, the destruction, the horror.

It was because of the gate that the only true parent she had ever had was gone.

She squeezed her eyes shut and felt wetness on her eyelids. Mike must have noticed, because then she felt his hand brush her face and clear her tears away. She grabbed his hand and pulled it toward her cheek. His touch calmed her.

"Shhhh," Mike soothed. "Come here."

El sat up and put her head into Mike's shoulder. She rotated her neck so that her ear was near his chest, she could almost hear his heartbeat. "Are you thinking about...about Hopper again?" Mike

asked in as soft a tone as possible.

El was thinking about her Dad; she had been thinking about him nonstop since the parking lot last night. But right now, something else was on her mind.

"No, it's not that," El sniffed. Mike looked at her strangely. "I mean...I have been thinking about him, all the time. But right now I was just...thinking about other things."

Mike started to stroke her hair slowly and soothingly. "What other things?" he pressed.

"I thought building the fort would be fun. But it's just making me think," El continued to cry softly.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Looking at the ceiling of the fort... made me remember the night we met, but it also made me remember the other stuff," she said. "When the bad men killed Benny, and when I was running for hours away from Papa, and how I opened the gate..."

Mike was still silent, allowing her to vent all of her emotions before he spoke. "I never got to be a...a normal girl. I never did anything. And it was because of Papa and the bad men that I opened the gate, and that's why all those people are gone."

It broke Mike's heart to hear about El's thoughts. Whenever she told him about the lab and what they did to her and how they treated her, it made his blood boil. And he felt terrible for building the fort with her, especially because it seemed that it had triggered these memories for El. He had dealt with enough of this stuff in the last six months.

"I know, I know," he sympathized, wrapping both his arms around her torso, planting a kiss on the top of her scalp. "No one deserves that kind of shit, El. But it's over now, and Papa is dead, and all of the bad men are too. Just...try not to think about it. They got what they deserved."

El tried to find resolution in Mike's words, but it was difficult. The

words of that man that night with Kali had haunted her since she had heard them. No...he is alive. What was his name? Ray...something? She had not stopped thinking about it, and she was afraid to admit it.

But she suppressed these thoughts, and focused on the fact that she was at home, in the arms of the boy who she loved. "Yes," she sniffled. "I guess."

"Do you want to take the fort down?" Mike asked.

"No, I want to keep it up."

"Okay," Mike told her, rubbing her arm. He lay down, and brought El with him, so that both of them were on the ground, looking at the blanket ceiling of the fort. Mike was about to tell her to focus on the good things in her life, but then he realized that, tragically, there was nothing. Her home was gone, her Dad was gone, and she was completely lost. Fuck, he thought.

Well, the least he could do was try to help her get through this hard time in her life. He made a silent promise to himself to never back down, and to always do everything in his power to be there for her whenever she needed it.

He took her gently by the wrist and kissed the top of her hand. Then her wrist, and a few times on her forearm. El giggled at the feeling.

"Mike, what are you doing?" she laughed. Mike smiled, but never stopped bombarding her with kisses. He continued to trail up her arm, gradually moving closer and closer to her face. El, not wanting to stop feeling his lips on her bare skin, pulled down the sleeve of her t-shirt, exposing her shoulder. Mike noticed this, but did not break his rhythm. With every second that he continued to inch upward on her arm, the chills within El grew more and more. As he approached the top of her bicep, El was quivering with anticipation. She just wanted to feel his lips on hers. The teasing was driving her crazy. He let his mouth linger on the top of her shoulder near her collarbone, and El had to bite back a groan.

When Mike reached this point, he decided to go a little further. He let his tongue slip out and he dragged it lightly across the skin on her

bare shoulder and toward her neck. El moaned and placed both her hands on the back of his head, pulling him in deeper. Mike rolled over onto El and continued to kiss and gently suck the skin at her shoulder and collarbone.

"Mike, go higher..." she moaned, curling her fingers into his locks of fluffy, dark hair. Mike happily obliged, tracing a slow and wavy line up to her neck with his lips and tongue. He took care to not go too fast, he wanted El to experience this slowly. He reached her neck and felt El's body become rigid and then relax after a second or two.

He parted his lips and placed them on her skin with more aggression, and began to suck. She let out a soft moan of contentment in response, and raked her nails down Mike's back. Mike ran placed one of his hands on the side of her head and massaged it through her hair.

El was in ecstasy. She couldn't believe that in the six months they had spent sharing moments similar to these in her room, Mike had never done this. She tilted her head behind her and arched her back to allow him to gain access to the front of her neck, where he moved his lips and continued to gently lick and suck.

"Oh, yes, Mike...like that..." she breathed, eyes closed.

"HEY! KEEP THE DOOR OPEN THREE INCHES!"

El's eyes shot open and she practically threw Mike off of her. She bolted upright and whipped her around the room and toward the door. Did Hopper say that? No, he was gone, he couldn't have said that. She turned to Mike, who was so shocked he couldn't even speak by the looks of it. He snapped out of his trance quickly.

"Oh my God, El, I'm sorry I must have gotten carried away, I..."

His voice seemed to fade away in that moment, and all she could hear was her Dad's voice in her head. Keep the door open three inches, that's the rule! Hey! What're you doing in there?!

What was happening?

Mike's voice returned, and he was still rambling. "El? El, are you

okay, oh my God..."

El erratically crawled out of the fort and stood up in the center of the room, and looked around. Was she going insane? She started to walk toward the couch, but she collapsed on her knees before she could even make it.

"He's...gone," she whispered to herself. "What's happening..."

"El, what's going on, I-" Mike started to say before he was cut off by El.

"Mike, I...I heard him," she whispered.

"Heard who? The Mind Flayer?" Mike gasped, panic rising in his voice.

"No, Hopper," she said through tears. "He was-he was yelling at-at us."

Mike instantly felt terrible. He hadn't been thinking, he just wanted to try to help El forget about all the shit that was going on, but maybe he went about it the wrong way. The more he thought about it, the more stupid he felt. Her fucking Dad had died yesterday, and what was he doing? Making out with her like nothing was wrong in the world. Fuck!

"Oh my God, El..." he said, and walked toward her with his arms out. A crying, hysterical El came to meet him in the middle, and she collapsed in his embrace.

"Why did he have to die?" she wept, to nobody in particular.

"I know, El, I know, shhh," he told her, backing up to sit on the couch, with her lying down with her head in his lap.

"I miss him-him so much," she wheezed. She felt mucus about to drip from her nose, and she inhaled sharply. She started to cough. She was a mess, a complete embarrassment, all in front of Mike. She didn't want Mike to see her like this.

She heaved herself off the couch and began to walk toward the front

door, still with a limp from the bite.

"El, where are you going?" Mike asked frantically, jumping from the couch to get to her.

"Just leave me alone!" she yelled, getting to the front door and opening it.

"El, wait! Just let me-" El slammed the door behind her, walking away, tears streaming down her face. She wasn't mad at Mike, she just didn't want to be near him. In reality, she was mad at herself for making herself look stupid and weak in front of Mike. She was mad at Hopper for leaving her and then getting himself killed. She was mad at Joyce for letting him die. She was mad at the whole FUCKING world.

She heard the door behind her being thrown open, followed by the distressed calls of Mike.

"El, please! Come back!" he called out. She continued to walk, starting to speed up. She didn't even know where the hell she was going, she just wanted to be alone. She tried to run because she heard Mike's footsteps behind her, but her leg would not allow that. Pain exploded from shin, but she didn't fall. She had already humiliated herself enough that day.

So she slowed down, and like she expected, she felt Mike's large hand clamp down on hers and pull. She tried to yank it away, but when it came to physical strength, Mike was superior. If she still had her powers, she would have flung him off of her in a second.

"El, come back, please," he begged. "Tell me what's wrong? Was it something I did?"

El stared at his eyes, his image slightly blurry from the salty liquid in her eyes. She shook her head no, and looked away.

"El, please, tell me the truth. It was me, wasn't it? I shouldn't have been kissing you like that, I-"

"GOD DAMMIT MIKE!" El screamed.

Mike took a step back, startled by her outburst. "It wasn't you, okay?! My FUCKING Dad just died," she shouted, blinded by rage and frustration. "Do you actually think you just kissing me like that would make me this FUCKING upset?! Not everything is about you all the time!"

Mike continued to stand there, speechless. El had never cussed before, let alone used the word "fuck." And here she was, having said it two times in practically the same sentence.

"All I want to do is spend time with you and kiss you and be with you but all I can think about is the fact that I'll never hear his voice again," her voice broke, and another round of tears started to cascade down her cheeks.

"And whenever I want to do things with you, all I hear in my head is his voice telling me not to! How can I..." her voice trailed off and she turned around again to walk away.

Mike, now snapped out of his confused daze advanced toward his girlfriend once again, except this time he didn't speak; he didn't even say a word. He simply snaked his arms around her from behind and pressed his cheek against hers, and didn't let go. And El stood there, caught in Mike's arms. She tried to force herself away, but Mike didn't give.

"Let go of me," she choked, barely able to form a sentence. "Please."

"No," Mike replied, determined to help her. "I won't."

"Why?" she sobbed, still trying to break from his hold.

Because I love you. No, not now. He couldn't drop that bombshell on her in this state.

"Because you mean too much to me for me to let you go," he decided to say instead. It was simple and true.

El was too emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted to refuse anymore. She let herself go limp in the arms of Mike, and she felt herself get hoisted up by him, and she started to move backward, back toward the door of Mike Wheeler's house.

Steve and Robin sat in the backyard of Steve's house, sipping on beers sitting on lawn chairs on the patio. They had had a couple each. Robin, being her first time drinking, had a good buzz going, but was still functioning decently. Steve, a seasoned drinker, was operating as if he had had nothing.

"Okay okay okay," Robin slurred, flinging her hand around in a wild gesture to get Steve's attention.

"Yeah," Steve asked, biting back a laugh.

"I have to ask," she began, after putting down her third beer on the table in front of them. "How did you and Nancy break up?"

Steve cringed, vividly recalling everything that had happened that night at Tina's party. He played it cool, though. It had been a long time ago, but it was still something that he did not like to talk about. His eyes fell on the still water of his pool and he began to retell the events of the party.

"Me and her were at a Halloween party last year, big house. Really intense. This was after Nancy and I had a little bit of a disagreement."

"About what?" Robin interrupted.

Steve sipped his beer again, signing into his can through his nose. "Back in '83 her best friend died. She was killed by one of those things, we called them Demogorgans. And as you know, after all the stuff happened, none of us were allowed to tell anyone about what had happened. Like, nothing. And I'm talking, like, government invading your house and shit."

"Really? Are you bullshitting, Dingus?" Robin asked quizzically.

"Nah, on God," Steve assured her. "So she was having a real time keeping the truth a secret. The parents of her friend, Barb, still thought she was alive, thought she had ran away from home. But she was actually dead. Her parents were about to sell their house to get the money to pay for a detective to find their dead daughter."

"Jesus Christ," Robin gawked. "That's...fucked up."

"Yeah," Steve nodded his head, fiddling with his now empty can. "She wanted to tell Barb's parents. I didn't. So I told her to just...just forget about all the crazy shit, and go to this party, and act like stupid teenagers for a couple hours."

"Makes sense," Robin nodded her head. "I don't get why the hell she would want to tell them, if the government would have fucking killed you guys or something."

"Yeah, exactly," Steve replied. "So we were at the party, and Nancy was drinking a shit ton, she was getting drunk. So I told her to watch her alcohol, take it easy on the punch. She didn't want to, we got in a fight, and she spilled some punch on herself. We were talking in the bathroom and she, uh..." Steve rubbed his chin.

"Then what happened?" Robin pressed, sitting up straighter in her chair and chugging down the last of her can.

"She told me that she didn't love me, right to my face. Called me bullshit, and that we killed Barb. She had been stringing me along for a fuckin' year. She didn't love me when I loved her."

Robin was silent for a moment, contemplating what she had just heard. Her initial thought was that Nancy was a bitch, but then she realized that falling out of love wasn't unheard of, nor was it her fault. But the way she went about it was definitely a bitch move. And Steve didn't deserve her.

"She didn't deserve you, then," Robin said. "It's not your fault. She just...wasn't the one, I guess."

"Yeah, I suppose," Steve said melancholically.

The two sat in their chairs, watching the sun slowly dip below the horizon, bathing the clouds in a fiery glow. Steve had opened his fourth beer, and was enjoying the taste. He loved summer evenings like these, relaxing on the patio watching the sunset while indulging himself in some light drinking. He suddenly had an idea.

"Hey," he spoke out to Robin, shattering the cool evening silence. "I got an idea, but I don't know if it's stupid or not."

Robin, become progressively more intoxicated by the minute, perked up at this statement. "Hit me, Herrington."

"You think it would be fun if we gave all the little shits alcohol?" he said with a mischievous smirk. He couldn't tell if it was him or the booze talking, but it was a good idea either way. "We just have to make sure they stay at my house, don't throw up, and crash here so they can sleep it off for the next day," he planned.

"That. Sounds. Awesome," Robin said, laughing maniacally at just idea at a bunch of fifteen year-olds getting drunk in Steve's basement. "Oh my God, this has to happen ASAP."

"I'll drink to that," Steve smiled, clinking his can against Robin's.

Thanks for reading this chapter. As always, leave a review, it lets me know if you are liking it so far :)

5. Chapter 5

Hey guys, thanks for coming back to read this chapter. Just an FYI, this chapter is when the "M rating" side of things start to come up. So be aware of that please. Also, would you guys prefer that I start uploading longer chapters but less frequently, or just keep doing what I'm doing? Let me know in the review section.

Will was eating dinner with his mom and Jonathan, but he wasn't hungry. He was too busy thinking about his mom had said earlier; she never saw a body. Hopper could be alive. What if he had found an escape route, or jumped through the gate, or...or anything?

He picked at his food, contemplating his options. He could tell the others, but would that do more harm or good? He didn't want to give anyone false hope, especially El. That would rip her apart her whole life. In this case, closure could be the best thing anyone could ask for. No questions, no mystery; Hopper was gone, end of story.

But on the other hand, maybe the idea of Hopper being alive was something that El needed to hear. Maybe it would make her happier. But what if he was just being held in some russian POW camp, getting tortured?

The best thing to do was probably to tell Mike. He would know what's best for El.

"Hey," his mom's voice came, shattering his train of thought. "You okay? You've barely touched your food."

Will hesitated, but replied to her. "Yeah, I'm fine. I was just thinking about something."

He faked a smile, but knew a pressing conversation with Mike would have to take place soon.

Max and Lucas had been in Lucas's basement for a while. They had just wrapped up watching a movie, and were watching the closing credits roll. Max sighed, and leaned into her boyfriend's body.

"How you feeling?" Lucas asked.

Max shrugged. "I don't know...weird, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

Max looked at him, and then furrowed her brow. "I don't know...I guess I just don't...don't quite believe it yet. Like my mind hasn't really accepted the fact that he's gone."

"That's okay," Lucas consoled. "You're not in a schedule. You have as much time as you want to accept it."

"Yeah. I guess," Max said. Lucas could tell that she was still confused about her emotions.

"I really don't want to go home," she sighed. "I just want to stay here with you. But the longer I'm away from my house, the more shit I'm gonna get when I go home."

"You can stay here for as long as you want," Lucas assured her. "My parents don't mind."

"Yeah, thank God. I wish I could bring you home with me," she cursed under her breath. "Fuck that."

"Hey, we've gone through this before. Calm down, there's nothing we can do."

Max kissed his lips. "I'm sorry, it's just that you deserve better. You deserve to be with someone who has parents who don't judge you based on your fucking skin colour."

Lucas clicked his tongue. He was a black person in 1983, he was no stranger to being the victim of racism in his life. Mind you, it was never anything too serious. The worst he would get is some dirty looks by some, but nothing more. It was only until he had met Billy and heard about Max's step dad that he ever really understood what it felt like to be on the receiving end of true discrimination. And even the thought it made his blood boil in anger, but he wasn't going to show that to Max.

"Don't worry, Stalker. Just a couple more years, and you can move into you own place and you can invite me over all you want, and you won't have to look at your step dad again."

Max laughed out loud and leaned over on the couch to cuddle with her boyfriend. She was so thankful for him. She would never admit it to him, or anyone for that matter, but she was pretty sure she loved him at this point. Especially after the last few days, all the times he had saved their asses, she was pretty positive. Her thoughts drifted to all the times he had done something heroic; using his slingshot to save her from Billy during the Sauna test, cutting off the tentacle of the Mindflayer at the cabin, and using his stupid fireworks to save El.

A part of her wanted to tell him how she felt, but another part of her wanted to hold back because she was afraid that he did not feel the same way about her. Maybe she could take to El about it. It sounded like a good idea for some nice girl talk.

"But seriously though, when are you going back to your house? I love having you here, I just want to make sure I can see you again," he chuckled, to which Max dryly laughed in return.

"Well," she said. "By now, they've probably heard that Billy is-is dead. And my Mom is probably in a crying fit, and my step dad is...well, I don't know what the fuck he'd be doing right now. So I'd be walking into a shitstorm, and chances are that both of them will be too preoccupied to even care about me. I won't tell them that I was there, I'll come up with some excuse. I don't think I'll be punished, so long as I don't get home more than a week from now."

"A week?" Lucas asked, displaying a small grin. "I like the sound of that."

"Mm, I bet you do," Max smirked pulling him in for a lingering kiss. Their lips moved rhythmically against one another's, until Max suddenly broke her motion and moved away.

"Is something wrong?" Lucas questioned. He knew that it was nothing that he did. Kissing like that was something that wasn't rare. So he couldn't have overstepped any boundaries or something.

"No, I just...I can't stop thinking about him."

"You mean Billy?"

"Yeah," Max replied, reaching up to rub her eyes with her thumb and index finger.

"Maybe talking to your Mom or something will help?"

Max considered his words, and concluded that he might be right. Her Mom was a really nice person who she loved a lot. She would be able to give her some guidance, help her get through this. But as much as her Mom would be able to help her, she had a feeling Lucas would do a much better job.

"Yeah, maybe I'll talk to her when I get home," she murmured. "I dunno."

She forced all the negative thoughts out of her mind. Right now she just wanted to have some sexy time with her man.

"Come here," she commanded, slightly biting her lower lip.

She shifted on the couch and moved to sit on his lap facing him. She pressed her lips savagely against his, and she felt the thoughts of her brother and step dad and everything else quickly ebb away. She tilted her head more to the right while he simultaneously did the same, deepening the rapidly intensifying make-out session. Lucas moved sideways to lie along the length of the couch, and she moved with him to straddle his hips. When his back met the seat cushions of the couch, Max moved her mouth to his neck, and began to gently suck the skin.

Lucas hummed quietly in contentment, and reached his right hand to grab Max's ass. Startled slightly, but not thrown off by the action, she lightly nodded her head and pressed her body into him, focusing mainly on his groin region. She began to sway her hips forward and backward, grinding up against the growing bulge in his pants. He continued to run his fingers along her behind, almost in ecstasy from the feeling of her firm ass in his hand.

Happy with her work on his neck, Max moved away from it and back

to his lips. She felt Lucas grab the hem of her top and tug it upward. She leaned back just enough to peel her shirt off, her chest almost fully on display for her boyfriend now.

She lunged back into him, and he moved his hands to her front to gently caress her breasts through her bra. He could ever-so-slightly feel her nipples through the fabric. He desperately wanted to go underneath, but he didn't want to overstep any boundaries. It wasn't that he had never done it before, it was just that in her current state with her brother and all, he didn't want to do anything wrong.

"Go under," she whispered into his mouth. Lucas grinned into the kiss, and slipped his fingers under the material. His warm fingers spread out and he tried to take as much of her tits in each of his hands as possible. The soft mounds of flesh felt amazing in his hands. He flicked his thumbs over each of her nipples, and she moaned in response.

"Want me to take it off?" she breathed flirtatiously.

"Please," Lucas murmured back.

She sat up again, and reached around her back and unclipped her bra. She placed it on the ground beside the couch, and remained upright to allow Lucas to soak in her bare image.

"God, you're so fucking sexy," Lucas whispered. She smirked and leaned back down to taste his tongue on hers. She parted her lips as he did the same and they met in the middle. Without looking, she worked her hands to loosen his belt.

Lucas's heart almost skipped a beat. She had never taken this step before. He wasn't going to object to it, though. He had spent many hours in his room fantasizing about this sort of thing, and to have it finally come to realization made him tingle all over. He didn't know for sure why she was making this move, but he could guess; perhaps she was trying to forget about Billy and everything by distracting herself with...well, whatever this was. If it was going to result in sex, then he thought that maybe he wasn't ready for this step.

But at the same time, the idea of sex made him nearly crazy with

desire. However, he'd feel incredibly guilty if they only did it just because she was feeling sorry for herself and needed a distraction. He lightly pushed her away from him. She had a confused face.

"What's wrong?" Max asked.

Lucas paused, and furrowed his brow. "Max...are you sure about this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're very upset and emotional right now, and...I want to make sure that you're actually ready for this and want this and you're not just trying to-to distract yourself by doing something that you don't really want to do."

Max thought to herself for a couple moments. She was upset and she was feeling a lot of emotions right now, and she'd be lying if she said that she wasn't trying to distract herself a little bit from all the stuff that was going on, but at the same time she wanted this. She was aware of the fact that not even a couple days ago she was explaining to El "happy screams," and that the things that Billy does (or did) alone with the girls was gross. But after everything Lucas had done, and everything he was doing to help her made her want more, made her want to give him more. Maybe not actual sex yet, but something a little more intimate than just kissing. Since that conversation with El, something seemed to have clicked in her. Maybe it wasn't so gross anymore.

"No, I want this," Max assured him.

"Are you sure?" Lucas said, still not believing what has happening.

Rather than responding, she simply slid her right hand under his pants and grabbed a hold of his penis through his boxers. Lucas exhaled sharply and suddenly. "Okay," he gasped.

"Yeah," she smiled mischievously. She wanted to show Lucas how much she appreciated him for being there for her, and all that he did for the party; the way he protected her from Billy during the Sauna Test; how he rescued El and the rest of them in the cabin with the ax;

his firework idea that ended up saving them all at Starcourt; the slingshot that he had fired to draw the Mindflayer away from her in the Gap.

She started to rub his erect member though the material of his underwear, and Lucas groaned back in ecstasy. He reached up to grab a hold of her breasts again, and massaged them passionately. The feeling drove Max crazy, and made her want to go even a step further. She yanked his pants down to about his knees so she could get better access to his crotch.

"You want me to go under?" she teased him.

"Yes," he replied, barely able to form words.

Max slipped her entire hand under his final layer of clothing. His pubes tickled her skin, and when she felt his dick in her fingers she immediately a pool of heat move toward her lower body. She began to stroke it slowly, listening to the music of Lucas's voice urging her to continue in a low voice.

Feeling bold, Lucas started to rub her vagina through her pants. Max moaned into his mouth, she was in heaven. She felt her core becoming dripping wet, she desperately wanted Lucas to feel his hand against her bare body, not just through her pants. But his parents were just up the stairs, and she wasn't quite sure that now was a good time to take any bigger steps than what they were already doing.

So she settled on a different idea.

She broke apart from the kiss scooted down the couch, so that her head became level with his genitals. Lucas could only guess what was coming next, and he was prepared. His girlfriend lowered his underwear, and his boner flopped out.

She had never seen anything so bizarre looking, yet so beautiful. It made her so fucking horny. Without hesitation, she placed her hand on his girth and dragged her tongue around and across the head of his dick.

"Oh, shit..." he groaned, and placed one of his hands on the back of her head. She swirled her tongue around his head, and up and down the shaft slowly and methodically. The taste of him was enough to make her lose her mind. She decided she was done building up, and decided to go fully in.

She wrapped her lips around the tip and sucked on it, while still flicking her tongue across it. "Oh God," Lucas moaned. "Like that." She moved her head back, her lips leaving his dick with a suctiony popping sound. She dove back in in less than an instant, and took more of him in her mouth, the first two and a half inches or so. She came back up but didn't let go of her grasp on it, and went back down. Up. Down. Up and down. She gradually increased her speed as she became more comfortable with the sensation of his cock sliding in and out of her mouth.

"Max," Lucas breathed. "Keep going, I'm almost there."

Her heart began to race at the thought of Lucas reaching his climax right in her mouth. She didn't know what she would do when it happened. Would she keep her mouth on it when it happened? Would she let it go and just let him do it into her hand?

She never got to decide because before she had even registered what was happening she felt her man's hand gently pressing her head downward as a hot sticky liquid began shooting into her mouth. Her initial instinct was to pull away, but it was already happening so she didn't. She enjoyed it. The taste was unique; sweet and tangy, and somewhat salty in a way. The consistency was strange, like a syrup.

She loved it. She swallowed it all, and lapped up the last of it from around his girth and her lips. She pulled away, smiling.

"So?" she asked, slightly shaking her upper body, allowing her tits to jiggle in front of him a little bit.

"Amazing," Lucas said, heaving and out of breath, eyes closed.

"Good."

Mike Wheeler walked through the door of his basement and placed a

crying and distressed El on the couch. When he set her down, he tried to move away to position himself on the couch beside her, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and did not relent.

"Pl-please," she whispered, her breath catching in her throat as she did so. "Don't let go."

Mike looked back at her, meeting her dark brown, glistening eyes. "El, I was just gonna move to sit beside..." he trailed off when he saw her shake her head. He understood what he had to do.

He scooped her back up in his arms and sat down on the couch, still holding her. Lying in her lap, she continued to sob quietly. She leaned upward and grabbed him so that their cheeks touched, one of her hands on the back of his head and the other on the small of his back.

Mike hugged her back, brushing the still falling tears from her face.

"Shhh," he soothed. "It's okay, it's okay. I got you."

El hated herself. She felt like some kind of parasite, clinging to Mike like a leech. But right now, his touch was the only thing in the world that made her feel like she wasn't going to just explode. She knew that it was only less than ten minutes ago she was screaming and cursing at him, and yet somehow, here he was, holding her. Stroking her strands of hair and brushing the tears from her face away.

God, she loved him so much.

Alright, chapter 5 in the books. Please review, and drop a follow of your enjoying the story. The more attention this story gets, the more time I'll put into it. Thanks guys :)

6. Chapter 6

After a quiet afternoon and evening that were spent cuddling on the couch, Mike and El were preparing to spend their second night together in his basement. He felt bad about it, but the past two nights sleeping with El left him...well, he felt there was more to be desired. He found that every time that he snuggled next to her, he had to fight back the urge to do something stupid. Reminding himself that now was not the best time, far from it actually, he resolved to hold in his urges for the time being. El was in a lot of emotional distress right now, and he needed to be there for her. He could not be just thinking about sex right now.

El was in the bathroom changing into her pajamas (which she had borrowed from Mike), and Mike was sitting on the couch, already changed and waiting for her to come out. The thought of her naked in the bathroom made him feel aroused, but he jammed those thoughts away.

Suddenly the phone rang. Startled, he whipped his head to face it. He walked toward it and picked up.

"Hello?" he said.

"Mike? It's Will."

Mike's eyebrows rose up a little bit. "Will? Why are you calling so late? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," he assured him. "I, uh...I was wondering if I could talk to you. Just the guys, no girls. Maybe tomorrow?"

Confusion and worry ran through his mind. "Yeah, sure, I guess. What's this about?"

"Are you alone right now? Is El with you?"

Glancing at the still closed door, Mike replied in a hushed tone, "Yeah, I am. Why?"

He heard Will take a deep breath. "My Mom told me about what

happened...in the Russian base, with the gate."

He felt his pulse quicken. What was he talking about? Did something happen that he didn't know about?

"What?"

"I think that...I think there's a chance Hopper might still be alive."

"What the fuck? How do you know?"

"I'd rather tell you in real life. Just me, you, Dustin and Lucas. I think this is something that the girls should stay out of."

"Okay, where do you want to meet? Tomorrow, I'm assuming?"

"El is still crashing at your house, right?"

"Yeah."

"Is there anyway you can get her off your hands for like, an hour?"

Mike pursed his lips, raking his mind for an idea. "Maybe I could see if she could go to Max's for a bit? I'll try to swing something. What time are you guys gonna come?"

"I'll call the others. How's one o'clock?"

"Sure. I gotta go. Talk to you later, Will."

"See you."

He placed the phone down just in time to hear the bathroom door open and see his love walk into the room. She was wearing a pair of shorts that Mike had lent her, and a loose white t-shirt.

"Hey," he smiled at her.

El gave him a half smile back, and crawled onto the couch beside him. Mike pulled out the couch and set up some pillows and sheets for them to sleep in. He climbed under and patted the spot beside him, inviting El to join. She walked over and slipped in beside him.

El was exhausted, emotional, and sick of life. And she was worried that her attitude was rubbing off on Mike. Like she was spreading her misery to him. He hadn't shown any signs of it, but she was still thinking about it. She pulled the sheets up to her neck, keeping a healthy distance from Mike. She felt bad about clinging to him for the entire day and wanted to give him space. But she wanted him.

Needed him.

And on top of that, she was being met with a familiar desire to kiss him.

Hard.

She didn't know why, but she was craving an escape at the moment. She wanted to pour out all of her emotion and frustration and anger into her boyfriend's lips with the ferocity of a wild animal. Just to forget about all her pain just for a few moments while she kissed the boy she was sure she loved. But she didn't know how to initiate. She had been a blubbering mess the whole day, like a stupid baby, and for all she knew she would start kissing him and he would hear her farther's voice in her head telling her to stop. Or Mike would push her off. Or something.

And if she did come onto him, he would probably be hesitant and confused. He would wonder what she was doing, but she knew what she wanted. She didn't want him just to distract her, she wanted him for a reason she could not explain.

Because she loved him, probably. In all honesty, she couldn't describe why exactly she was feeling. Maybe it was simply because it had been half a week since they had properly made out on her bed.

Not wanting to be *too* direct, she decided to drop a hint. She rolled to face away from

and pressed her body against his. His warmth soothed her skin, and she felt her lip curl in spite of herself. Mike responded by wrapping his arms around her torso. Although the gesture was kind and warm hearted, and would have left her content on any other day, right now she desired more. She wanted more than just to spoon.

She decided to try something that she had never done before. She wiggled out of Mike's hold and stepped out of the bed.

"Where are you going?" Mike asked her when she started to make her way to the bathroom.

"I'm gonna change shirts, I'm hot," she replied, without turning her head back. She stepped into the bathroom and left the door open a crack. She slipped out of her shirt, exposing her naked breasts. She slipped her bra back on that was hanging over the sink. She looked at herself in the mirror, feeling a tad self-conscious.

She was fourteen years old, and while she was sure that she still had a small bit of ways to go in terms of physical development, she was no stranger to the hormones that were associated with being a teenager. Especially in the last couple months, she had felt herself being slightly disappointed with just kissing. What she knew was that she wanted more, yet she didn't really know exactly that was.

She stood there, continuing to evaluate herself in the mirror, wondering if this was a smart decision. She liked to think that she had good sized breasts; they certainly weren't flat, but they weren't so large that they hung down or anything like that. It was enough for her to grab them and get her hands full. And she was hoping Mike would like them as well.

But what she did know was that boys found breasts attractive. And hopefully, if maybe she exposed herself a little bit, Mike would take the hint. So she nodded to herself and stepped outside into the basement. Mike had his eyes closed, but was facing her direction.

She cleared her throat. "Mike? Is it okay if I wear this to sleep?"

Mike opened his eyes groggily and was met with a wonderful sight. He opened his

mouth to speak, but found trouble finding words to answer her. After a solid three seconds of him staring at her, he was finally able to make a sound. "Yeah, sure."

El walked toward him, and he couldn't keep his eyes off her tits. Holy

shit, they looked good. They were so shapely and not too small but not too big. Enough for him to completely fill his hands with. He wanted to rip the bra off her so bad. Why would she wear that? Did she want him to initiate something?

His question was answered when El moved into the bedsheets with him. She leaned her back to him again like they normally spooned, except this time she placed one of his hands right on her breast. Mike was shocked. He tentatively rested his hand against the fabric, able to feel the soft flesh in his hand.

"Go ahead," El whispered to him. The feeling of his larger hands against her breasts was indescribable. She wanted desperately for him to go underneath, but she also didn't want to overstep any boundaries.

Feeling her tits being caressed by the loving hands of her boyfriend, she lightly moaned into the bedsheets, in complete ecstasy. She felt his thumb glide right over where her nipple was, which elicited a feeling that gave her chills.

Unable to fight the urge anymore, she rolled over onto him and attacked his face fiercely with hers. She grabbed his shoulders and pressed her tongue into his mouth, and they touched in a moment of pure bliss. They had only kissed like this a couple of times before, and whenever they did El felt like she was floating on a cloud. And right now, she was lying on top of him, topless, gently moving against his body. She wasn't quite sure why she was moving this way; but it felt right.

Suddenly, she felt a growing presence against her lower half. Something stiff and hard was poking at her thighs through Mike's pants. Even though El had never formally learned about sex education, she was aware that boys had a body part called a penis, and she had a vagina. She wasn't quite sure what they were used for, apart from peeing, but when her part and his made that ever-so-small amount of contact she felt waves of pleasure shoot all over her, from toes to the tips of her hair.

So she continued to move against it, feeling it still grow. She couldn't help but let out a small vocalization of pleasure when it poked her

right on the spot, to which Mike hummed back at her through her mouth.

The accumulation of stimulation on all her senses made all her problems seem to fade away, like steam rising into the air. In that moment, Hopper, Billy, the cabin, the battle at the mall all seemed to become distant memories, and it was because of the boy beneath her. She continued to vigorously massage his lips with hers, and ran her fingers through his wild hair.

Suddenly, Mike's breath quickened and he started to buck his hips upwards lightly. The action caught El off guard, but she welcomed it. He parted from her lips and arched his back, and let out a muffled groan into her neck, and suddenly she felt a warmth near her center. But before she could even think about what it was, Mike suddenly fell silent. His eyes shot open and he stared at her, and he took off toward the bathroom.

Mike slammed the door behind him.

"Shit shit shit shit shit," he cursed in a whisper. "FUCK!"

He dropped his pajama bottoms and looked at the mess on his thighs. He had been so caught up in his intimate moment with El that he had not realized that he had drawn himself completely to climax. He had shot semen all over himself and on his pants, and had ditched her when it happened. She was probably out there, confused and upset, and he was in here, with a growing feeling of awkwardness and fear because he had no clue what he was going to do. He had no change of pants with him in the basement, and El was waiting outside.

Fuck, he thought. He quickly hatched a plan in his mind. He was going to stay in the bathroom for a few more minutes, hopefully El would fall asleep in that time. He would go up to his room and change, and hopefully none of his family would notice. And he would come back, get into bed, and sleep the rest of this nightmare off.

He opened the door, and it seemed that El was asleep, or she was just ignoring him. He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut, and went upstairs.

El awoke the next morning with one thing on her mind; seeing Max.

After the strange events of last night, she decided that it would be best if she knew more about sex and penises and such, because after last night she was dying to know more. Most of all, she wanted to know what on Earth had happened to Mike. She glanced at the digital clock on the table and saw that it was half past nine. She wiggled out from under the sheets and grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, and scrawled a note to Mike that she left in his hand in his sleep. She changed clothes and slipped out the back door.

She made her way to Max's in good time, just over fifteen minutes. She approached the door and knocked on it. No one answered. She knocked again. Again. Still no answer. She huffed out an exhale of defeat. She didn't realize that she might not be home. She turned around to walk back down the driveway, but came face to face with Max instead.

"El? What are you doing here? Is everything okay?" she asked.

El smiled. "Yes, everything is good. I was just...wondering if we could..." she struggled to find the right words. This was kind of embarrassing. "Talk? About something?"

"Yeah, sure," she replied. "What's up?"

El hesitated, wondering if this was a good time. Her brother had just been killed, and maybe she was not very emotionally stable at the moment. But she was acting fine, and wasn't even at her house.

"Are you sure?" she questioned, wanting to be positive that she could talk to Max about this. "It's a...weird subject."

Max laughed at this. "Yeah, El, it's fine. I just got back from Lucas's. Tell me what's on your mind."

If Max was honest, what she had said was a partial lie. She wasn't feeling one hundred percent fine; in fact, not even fifty percent. But it was a lot better than yesterday, and she knew that the more she kept herself occupied with other stuff, the less she would feel sad about Billy. She was counting on a morning of being sad on her own in her

room, but maybe she could have some fun with El, and try to talk about some stuff. They were going through similar things right now. Maybe that's why she was here.

"Can we go inside?" El tentatively asked, to which Max nodded. After entering her desolate house, they made their way to her bedroom, and El sat down on the bed and Max pulled up a chair from her desk, which she sat on backward, leaning her arms over the backrest.

El took a deep breath, trying to figure out how to start this conversation. "Remember when you told me about...about 'happy screams?'"

Max cocked her eyebrows upward. She wasn't expecting this. "Yeah, sure. Why?"

"And you said that...Billy does things with girls when they're alone?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"What kind of things?" El blurted. She saw Max furrow her brow. Maybe she was being too forthcoming.

"El, what happened with you and Mike?" she asked, smirking.

"What?" El questioned pretending to be confused. Alas, lying was not something she was good at.

"El, you wouldn't be asking me about this unless something happened. What happened?" she pressed, scooting her chair forward to sit closer to her friend.

El cursed herself for letting Max see right through her. She was hoping to have this conversation on neutral grounds, but now Max was going to be asking her a bunch of questions. She didn't have a problem with it, but it was kind of awkward for her to talk about. She felt so ignorant and naive, and would probably make a fool of herself.

"Well, I've been sleeping with Mike the last couple nights," El began.

"Wait," Max cut her off, her tone increasing in urgency. "What do you

mean by 'sleep with?'"

"We both slept on the pullout couch in his basement," she responded, wondering why Max had gotten so worked up about that statement. Max exhaled, and looked relieved.

"Okay," she said. "Continue."

She looked at her feet. This was when the conversation had the potential to become weird for her. "I had a really bad day yesterday. And Mike was taking care of me, and the day before that, even though I was really mean to him a couple times," she recalled, remembering her blowout on Mike's lawn.

"And I was still upset. But I wanted to try to...make myself forget about it for a bit."

"Distract," Max corrected.

El had heard that word before. She recognized its meaning. "Yes," she said. "Distract. And I wanted to...to make out with him."

She searched Max's face for any sign of reaction, but she was still looking at her with indifference. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. "But I didn't know how to...start. And I thought that maybe he would be confused if I went to him. So I was just confused. I wanted to tell him that I wanted it without making it seem weird. I was worried that he would be...mad. Or something. I don't know, I feel stupid."

Max reached over and put a hand on El's. "No, you're not stupid. I've been having some similar thoughts about Lucas. These are...hard times. And sometimes people have trouble thinking and making decisions during times like that."

El smiled. She was thankful for Max comforting her like this. "Thank you," she said gratefully. Max nodded and smiled.

"So what did you do?" she asked.

"Well," she continued. "I don't know much about...boys and girls. And the...the parts. But I know that boys like..." her voice dissipated, trying to find a way to say it without coming across as a total moron.

"Tits?" Max finished for her.

"Ti-tits?" El repeated unsurely. She had never heard that word before.

"Breasts," Max corrected herself, smiling a little bit. "It's a slang word for breasts."

"Oh," El replied, nodding. "Yes. Breasts. So I went to the bathroom and I took my shirt off and went to sleep with Mike with just my bra on."

Again, she searched for Max's face for a reaction, but there was none. It made her wonder what sort of things her and Lucas were getting up to. "Do you think that was a good idea?"

"That depends," Max replied, folding her hands. "Did you guys make out?"

"Yes."

"Did he like it?"

"Yes."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes."

"Then it was a good idea," Max concluded. "I'm assuming he felt them up a little bit, right?"

El thought of last night, having Mike's hands caressing them. She felt warm and fluttery inside at the memory. "Yes," she replied dreamily.

"And you were okay with it, right?"

"Yes," El confirmed.

"Then it's fine," Max assured her. "El, I know that a couple days ago I told you that...that things boys and girls do together are gross, and about the 'happy screams,' but I have a confession."

"What is it?" El asked, her interest piquing.

"I know that I told you that it was gross and stuff but I guess...I guess I had a change of heart a few days ago. I also stayed at Lucas's house for the last few nights, and we...did some stuff."

El considered what she said for a brief moment. "What kind of stuff?" she asked. "Did you guys...did you guys do 'sex?'"

Max laughed. "No, we aren't quite there yet. But we did something else. Or maybe I should say, I did."

"What did you do?"

Max felt her cheeks go crimson. She really did not want to describe what she did to Lucas to El face to face, with words. She remembered the offer she made to her about her Mom's cosmo magazines, and had the perfect idea. "One second, I'll be right back," she said, and darted out of the bedroom to the bathroom, where the magazine rack was located. She grabbed all the magazines she could find, and walked briskly back to her room, where El was still perched on the side of the bed.

"Here," she said, handing her a stack of nearly a dozen magazines. "This stuff will tell you all you need to know about sex. And probably even more."

El eyed the stack of paper in curiosity. It would take her probably days to get through everything, probably more because she was still a slow and shaky reader. But nonetheless, she was thankful for Max's help.

"I put a sticky note under the section that describes what me and Lucas did last night," she said. While still unsure if telling El was a good idea, she was confident that she would keep it to herself. Plus, she was her best friend. She needed someone to talk to about this stuff.

"Thank you, Max," El said, and stood up to hug her. Max reciprocated.

"Your welcome, El," she said. "But just promise me one thing."

"What?" El asked.

"Make sure Mike doesn't force you into anything that you don't want to do."

El nodded her head, positive that Mike would never do such a thing. "I won't."

Meanwhile, four teenage boys were collected in the basement of the Wheeler household, after listening to Will recount what his Mom had told him about there not being a body, and that Hopper could still be alive somewhere. Lucas, Dustin, and Mike had sat on the couch, and Will had stood before them talking, as if he were giving an in-class presentation.

"...and I don't know what to do with that information," he finished, out of breath from talking for nearly three minutes straight without stopping.

His three friends sat in silence, for a moment. Mike considered what Will had said. The idea that Hopper could be alive made him feel emotions. He felt hopeful that he could still be out there, somewhere. He really hoped for that. As he had previously discussed with El earlier, he regretted how he treated Hopper during the summer and the chance to make that up was something he would take in a second.

But thinking logically and realistically, he was likely dead or in a russian prison on some remote island. The chance of him coming back were minuscule, to say the least. The fact that Joyce hadn't seen a body didn't confirm enough to draw conclusions. What if his body just ended up somewhere else where Joyce didn't see? Or what if the explosion had completely vapourized him into atoms? Or he was taken by the Russians?

Telling El would give her false hope. She would spend the rest of her life wondering about Hopper, praying for him to come back when he almost definitely wouldn't. Telling her this news would just prolong her pain. The best thing they could do for her would be to keep it a secret so that she could go through the grieving process and then move on. It would be the best for her, and Mike knew that for a fact. His mind was made up.

His inner thoughts were broken when he heard crack followed by a hiss. He looked over and saw that Lucas had just opened a can of Coca Cola.

"Seriously, dude?" Dustin asked. "I still don't get how you can drink that."

"I don't know how you can't. This stuff is the shit."

"Guys!" Will interrupted, and their three heads whipped back toward him. "What do you think?"

Dustin spoke first. "I think we should tell El. It's her fuckin' Dad, she should know. How can she go around thinking that he's dead when he might be alive? That's not fair to her at all."

Mike jumped in when he heard that. "Exactly! Emphasis on 'might!' How can we give her false hope like that?"

"It doesn't matter! Friends don't lie!" Dustin shot back. "And having her believe he's dead when he might not be is a lie."

"Do you really believe Hopper is alive?" Mike retorted, almost yelling now. "Do you really believe that?"

"Yes."

The room fell silent.

"Look," Lucas said. "The way I see it, each way has an upside and a downside. If we tell her, she'll know the truth. But she could very well be living the rest of her life hoping that he will come back when it will probably never happen. Or, we could let her be, and she'll get over it in a few months, and she won't have any false hope, and no extra pain."

"How do you know it's false?" Will joined the conversation, taking Dustin's side.

"Even if he isn't, he might as well be. If he's alive, he's definitely in some Russian POW camp across the ocean."

The room erupted into anarchy and arguing, and Mike could feel his blood start to boil. It was him who had been with her for the last three days. It was him who had seen her as a crying and emotional mess for so long. His friends had no idea what they were talking about. His friends didn't know *jack shit*. In an outburst of anger and an attempt to protect El, he shouted out.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, and his voice cut through the noise like a hot knife through butter. All three of his friends quieted immediately, and turned to meet his shaky gaze.

"I have had to see El more upset that she has ever been since I fucking met her for the last seventy-two hours straight. The fact that Hopper is gone has completely fucking ripped her the fuck apart. Leading her on by saying that he might be alive, after all the grieving she has already gone through will only drag out her pain and grief. What she needs to do is to finish the process, and then move on. Not cling onto it."

He found himself almost fighting back tears of frustration. What Dustin and Will were proposing was not in anyway good for El. He thanked God for Lucas, because once again, he was the one who had his back in this predicament.

"Okay, fine, I guess you're right," Dustin leaned, and Will nodded. "We're sorry. You know El better than any of us."

Mike nodded his head, content with the outcome of this conversation. "Good."

The boys sat in a somewhat awkward silence. "Where is El right now?"

"Max's," Mike replied.

Lucas squinted his eyes. "What's she doing there?"

El was walking back to Mike's house after a long conversation with Max. She was holding a large bag filled with the Cosmo magazines. She was looking forward to reading them, but she was feeling a little

bit of skepticism as well. Whatever she was going to uncover in them was something that made people uncomfortable. Whenever she had tried to talk to Hopper about any of it, or one of her friends, even Mike at times, they got all squirrely and tried to get her to change the subject, or told her to ask someone else.

Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that all the people she had talked about were boys. She had gathered that they were different when it came to this sort of thing. She found herself thanking Max for her help. She also found herself wondering if she was to bring up the subject with Mike once she knew more about it, if he would still have a similar reaction.

She came to the backdoor of Mike's home and was about to knock on the door, but heard yelling coming from inside. She recognized Mike's voice.

"...what she needs is to finish the process, and move on from it. No cling to it."

There was no more voices for a couple seconds, but then she heard more talking. She

couldn't make out the words of her friends, they weren't yelling like Mike had been. She knocked on the door.

"Oh, shit!" she heard Dustin's voice through the door.

"Shut up!"

The back door swung open and she was greeted by Mike. He smiled, and his eyes moved to her giant bag of magazines. "What are those?" he asked.

El's heart started to beat faster. She hadn't planned for Mike to see the magazines.

"Nothing, just...some books Max gave me."

"Oh. Okay," he replied, without further question.

Phew.

"What were you yelling about? To the others?" she said, giving Mike a question of her own. Mike suddenly looked visibly uncomfortable, and she noticed that the others also had strange expressions.

"Nothing, we were just...talking about a DnD campaign Will and I are planning."

"Oh," she replied.

But she had a feeling that her boyfriend was lying again.

7. Chapter 7

Sorry that this chapter was so short, but I felt like I really needed to get something out. I try not to go more than five days without updating. Thanks for the reviews on the last chapter, keep them up :) Enjoy!

Joyce awoke slowly and blinked the sleep out of her eyes. She looked around the house and saw that it was dark out. There was a bottle of vodka on the coffee table next to her head, a parting gift Murray had given her a few days back, after Starcourt. She flicked her eyes to the clock overhead and realized that it was ten-thirty in the evening. She cursed to herself and stumbled to the phone through the poorly lit household.

She dialed the Wheeler's phone and waited impatiently for someone to pick up on the other line. She heard a click and then a pubescent male voice.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mike? It's Joyce," she replied.

"Hi, Mrs. Byers. What's up?"

"I was just checking to see if Will was at your house right now," she asked nervously. Despite all the time it had been since November of 1983, she always became exceptionally unhinged when she wasn't sure exactly where her youngest child was.

"Yeah, he's here. Is it alright if he sleeps over here for tonight? My Mom said it was okay."

"Yeah, sure, that's fine. Just make sure he gives me a call tomorrow morning so I know everything is okay."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Byers. Have a good night."

"You too, Mike. Say hi to your mom for me."

"I will," he responded, and then hung up. Joyce put the phone down

and walked back to the couch. She poured herself another shot and downed it in a swift gulp. Her face contorted, but the warmth that filled her body made her quickly forget about the taste.

It made her forget about a lot of things. The vodka had been her best friend forever since the fourth. It had been three days. Three long, painful and agonizing days. And the only things that had been on her mind ever since that night had been Hopper.

Fucking Hopper. And what made her forget about Hopper? Alcohol. But not really. It just seemed to... lessen the pain.

Joyce was convinced that her love life was cursed. After Lonnie, she was sure the next person that she would meet would be the one. And it would have been. She easily imagined herself growing old with Bob and moving away, starting a fresh new life away from Hawkins, away from the terrible memories. And then he was gone.

For sure, her next partner would be the one right? She would find love and find a person to finally settle down with and start rebuilding her broken life. But no, those fucking Russians had different plans.

She slammed the shot glass down and gave herself another, and poured it into her mouth without another thought. She gagged but did not relent as she had a third. She fell back down on the couch and felt a tear start to form in the corner of her eye. She could almost feel Hopper sitting beside her, talking about the date she had asked him out on, just less than an hour from... from his death.

That word made her sick. Sick to the stomach. She did not want to accept the fact that he was dead. He couldn't be. There was not a body. She had seen the other bodies, the Russian ones in the corner of the room. Those mounds of melted flesh and bones. There was no pile where Hopper had been standing before she pulled the switch. She kept telling herself that he got away. He must have jumped through the gate, or ran away into some kind of escape room. But that just meant he was trapped in the Upside Down, or some Russian POW camp, probably getting tortured.

"Hopper," she stuttered, covering her mouth with her hand, now completely in tears. Her body shook as the sobs came out of her

unwillingly. Thank god Jonathan was out with his friends, the last thing she needed was him to see her like that, drunk and crying on the couch. God, she was a mess.

She remembered standing in the parking lot, right after they have gotten out of the Russian base. Will had run to her, across the wet pavement, and hugged her. She felt so relieved to know that her boy was okay, and when she saw Jonathan in the ambulance with Nancy, she felt at ease knowing that all her kids were alright.

But then, she had looked over and seen something that had seared itself into her mind, something she would never forget. She had seen El, wandering around the parking lot, looking for her...her Dad. She had looked so lost, so helpless and scared. Like an orphaned puppy, who had just lost its entire family in a matter of moments. She had looked around, her hope falling by the millisecond only to come to the heartbreaking conclusion that he was gone.

And then she met her gaze and sobbed into Will's shoulder, and Will didn't even know what was wrong until after.

"Oh my God, El," she cried into the crook of her arm. She had a fourth shot, which she had a hard time swallowing. Her final thought before passing out on the couch again was that she had to do something to help El. She had to carry out what Hopper had been doing before he had died.

She had to help El.

Max sat alone in her bedroom, staring at the ceiling. She had been doing this for a while now, alone with her thoughts. Her mind was sort of empty. She had been thinking about Billy, the image of him standing up to the Mindflayer etched into her mind like a chiseled rock. But it had gotten to the point where she had been thinking about it so much that it almost didn't feel important.

She guessed that this could be possible; she had been sitting here for nearly three hours. It was like she had cried out all the tears, vented out all the emotions...and now she was just...empty. On top of that, she was wondering where the hell her parents were. Then it hit her.

They were out of town, with friends. That meant that they had no idea what was going on, no idea about Billy, about anything.

"Fuck," she whispered, thinking about how awful it was going to be when they finally came home. She knew that her Mom would be devastated but she honestly had no clue how her stepdad was going to react. He was abusive and seemed to hate Billy in every possible way. But still, he was his Dad, and that had to mean something.

Right?

Rubbing her face, she crawled out of her bed, and slowly trudged across the hall and set a hesitant foot into Billy's bedroom. Resting her hand on the side of the doorway, she moved in. She smelled the beer and cigarettes mixed with sweat and cologne. She saw his disgusting posters on the wall and the ashtray on his desk. To anyone else, it looked like a smelly mess of a young man.

But to her, it was a symbol of a family member who had given his life for her and her friends. She stepped toward his bed, fell onto it, and screamed into the pillow. For as long and as hard as she humanly could, ripping her vocal cords raw.

She looked up and saw his leather jacket hanging on the back of his door. She crawled out of her curled up position on the bed and stepped toward the article of clothing. She took it in her hands, folded it up and clutched it close to her chest, salty tears falling and dropping onto the jacket. She brought it to her room and set it down on her pillow. She lay down next to it, and pulled it over her body, almost as if it were a blanket of sorts. It was like a part of Billy was still with her. And at the moment, she promised herself that she would keep this jacket, keep it in her room, and never let leave her room. So that a part of her brother would always be with her. That was the last thing she remembered before she drifted to sleep.

The phone rang abruptly, and she dragged herself over to it and picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hi, Max!"

It was Lucas. Doing her best to hide her feelings, she sniffed and

wiped her eyes, and tried to put on the most convincing voice. "Hey, Stalker. What's up?"

"Everyone is at Mike's house right now. Do you want to come and hang out with us?"

Max smiled. This sounded like the perfect thing to get her mind off things. "Yeah, I'll be there soon."

Max knocked on the front door of the Wheeler household and planted her hands on her hips. She heard some commotion coming from the other side of the door, and then it swung open. She was greeted by Mike and Lucas.

"Is El here?" she asked.

"Hello to you, too," Lucas said mockingly but jokingly. Max laughed and pulled her boyfriend in for a hug and placed a kiss on his cheek.

"We don't like El going anywhere near the front door. She's in the basement, don't worry," Mike told Max.

"Good," she grinned and charged past the two boys to be united with her new best friend. She charged down the stairs, at the bottom of which El was waiting eagerly. Her face lit up when she saw Max running down the wooden steps.

"Max!" she exclaimed. Max laughed and enveloped her in her arms, and El wholeheartedly reciprocated.

"How are you doing?" Max asked.

El parted from the hug, still smiling. "I'm okay. Everyone is here."

"Hi, Max," Dustin called out from the couch. Will waved to her from where he was sitting

cross-legged on the floor.

"Hi guys," Max waved back at them. She was still very friendly with Dustin, but her and Will still had not quite connected yet in the way she was with the rest of the group.

"So what have you guys been up to?" El asked.

"Well, we've been teaching El how to play Dungeons and Dragons, but she doesn't like it that much," Mike replied, smiling.

El spoke up quickly. "No, that's not true," she said. "I just don't understand it enough. It's just so complicated."

"Do you want to play with us?" Lucas asked. He was worried Max would consider him a nerd, but he realized that she probably already thought that about him. He saw a smile tug at the corner of Max's lips.

"Yeah, sure," she replied and walked over to the table where the board was set up.

The boys immediately got excited, which did not go unnoticed by Will. He was absolutely ecstatic that Mike and Lucas seemed to be finally getting back into D and D. He was hoping that they weren't faking it, but he was sure that they weren't.

"Okay," Will said. "Max, you can join Lucas so you can learn how to play. That's what we're doing with El and Mike."

"Alright," Max said, and sat down beside Lucas on one side of the table. Lucas pulled Max in with his arm and curled it over her shoulders. From there, Will launched back into the story, doing voices for different characters along with sweeping gestures, making it feel as if there really was a story unfolding right on the table in their basement. And the group played D and D for a long, long time.

Jonathan walked through the unlocked front door of his house and saw his Mom passed out on the couch, next to a bottle of vodka. He sighed. He knew his Mom was hurting, hurting badly. She was grieving for Hopper. He understood this. Hopper had done so much for their family over the last year and a half, and the fact that he was dead shocked even him.

He walked into his room and dropped his bag, and collapsed onto his bed. Alone with his thoughts, his mind started to roam. He thought of the people who had been lost. The belongings that had been lost. Of

the people that he knew, there was Hopper, Billy, Heather, Heather's parents, Mrs. Driscoll, and Bruce. He didn't feel bad about Bruce. He always resented Tom for being so mean and unfair to Nancy, but he would not have wished death upon him.

But the person who he felt the most terrible for was not someone who had died. It was El.

Her only parent, the only proper parent that she had ever had, had died in a heroic sacrifice. And now, El was homeless and orphaned. He knew that his Mom was thinking of something, right? She was the only adult who knew about all of it, and she was, well...perhaps not the *best* candidate to adopt a third child. But she was the *only* candidate.

Of course, he could pick up some extra hours, and help his Mom out. He definitely would. It was the least he could do for the girl who saved nearly the whole world and his brother and himself on many occasions. And right now she needed help.

He knew that he would try to be the best big brother to her, and he also knew Will would do the same. And the more he pictured it in his mind, the more he thought it was a good idea. Him, Will, his Mom and El all living together, in a small and modest house, helping El get past her loss and moving toward a better future for all of them.

The concept brought a tear to his eye, and he smiled to himself. He smiled, turned on his side, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

Next chapter will be out tomorrow or the day after.

8. Chapter 8

As promised, here is the next chapter. Hope you enjoy it, I really enjoyed writing this one.

"And victory is yours!" shouted Will, and the rest of the party cheered. Mike threw his arms up and hugged El, Max high-fived Lucas, and Dustin fist-bumped Will.

"King Tristan, thankful for your services once again, grants you all a gift of golden coins, and new weapons. And you all leave the castle, and ride out on your horses, toward the sunset."

"That was a sick campaign, Will," Mike complimented.

Lucas nodded his head. "Yeah, it was."

Dustin gave a hearty thumbs-up, his mouth currently full of M&M's. Even El and Max looked like they had a good time.

They all sat back, content with the evening that they had just spent together, populating the couches and chairs.

"Wait," Lucas suddenly said. "Dustin, aren't you grounded right now?"

Dustin laughed. "Yeah, I was, but I wore my Mom down. I managed to convince her not to ground me. It was hard, but I am an experienced veteran."

All of them chuckled at that. They sat in silence for a few moments, bathing in the warm ceiling lights of the basement. It was eleven o'clock, and Mike was wondering where his parents were. He then remembered that his Dad was on a business trip and his Mom was at a party with some friends. He assumed Holly must have been having a sleepover with a friend or something. It occurred to him that he could host a sleepover with all of his friends.

As if reading his mind, Will asked a question. "Where are your parents, Mike?"

"Not here," Mike replied with a smile. "You guys wanna crash here for

the night?"

"Hell, yeah," Dustin exclaimed, completely on board with the idea of having a sleepover with all of his friends. His enthusiastic remark was met with agreement among the rest of the party.

"Alright, let me just get some sleeping gear for you guys, I'll be right back," Mike announced.

"I'll help you," El replied, following her boyfriend up the stairs.

"Don't take too long up there, you two," Max teased, and the rest of them snickered. El smiled back at them.

They reached the top of the stairs, and El looked expectantly at Mike, who seemed to be frozen in place, staring at her. What was he thinking?

"Mike?" she asked, furrowing her brow in confusion. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head, snapping out of his trance. "Sorry, I was just, umm..."

Mike was thinking about the lie he had told a few hours ago. When he told El that they were planning for a D and D campaign when in actuality they were all planning to lie to her. And it was his idea. He did not like doing it, but he knew it was the best thing that they could do collectively as a group to help her get better. But now he found himself second-guessing his decision, wondering if he had made the right call. If she was to ever find out about this lie, the lie he told when she walked in, about them *not* talking about Hopper possibly being alive... If she found out about that, it would probably hurt the relationship a lot...but maybe not. Maybe she would understand his dilemma. He decided that this was a bridge that he would cross if it came to it.

"I was just thinking about something," he said. He wasn't lying, he was thinking about something. He just didn't say what.

"Is something wrong?" El asked, looking concerned.

"No, it's fine. Don't worry, it's nothing," he said, trying to just dodge

the truth rather than lying. But El caught on.

"Friends don't lie," she said reciting the rule that Mike had given her all that time ago.

"I don't want to talk about it right now," Mike snapped. El startled and looked slightly hurt. He immediately felt terrible. So he quickly thought of something to say that was believable.

"Sorry, El," he apologized, pulling her in for a hug. "All this stuff is just getting to me a

little bit."

"What do you mean?"

Mike chewed the inside of his lip, and thought of a cover-up on the spot. "Everything that's happened the last few days, I guess it's just...starting to sink in more. I can't stop thinking about the Mindflayer, or Billy choking you, or..."

What had started out as a lie had turned into an actual problem, because now he felt a lump forming in the back of his throat, and he was having a hard time swallowing it. The image of Billy strangling the girl he loved was too much for him to handle. He squeezed El tighter in his arms, and a tear ran down his cheek and fell on her shoulder.

"It's okay," El soothed. "I'm okay, you're okay, and it's over. He's gone."

Mike sniffled and smiled. He let go of El and looked into her deep, brown eyes. She pecked him on the lips. Their moment was shattered when an annoyed Dustin hollered up the stairs. "Where's the sleeping gear?"

"One second," Mike called back. "We're getting them now, we were just talking about something."

Mike led El to the storeroom, a place he rarely went into. "They're somewhere in here. Help me find the light switch."

"Okay."

Mike felt along the wall but didn't find anything after a few seconds. He suddenly felt something warm and soft, and realized that he had met El's hand. They both froze, but he relaxed when he felt her fingers curl into his. He turned his body toward the open door to try to get some light in his eyes, but he saw El nudging it closed with her foot.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, but his inquiry was soon answered. Now that it was dark, he could barely see anything, but he felt the unmistakable tickle of El's quiet breath against his mouth. He slightly parted his lips, and felt a pair of soft, delicate hands wrap gingerly around the back of his neck, gently pulling it downward. And then, in an explosive moment of bliss the two of them connected.

El stood on her tiptoes to reach upward and captured Mike's lips with hers, and she tilted her head to the right and pressed into them passionately. Mike did the same as he took his right hand and submerged it into her flowing hair. He massaged the strands, sending sparks down El's body. In response, she moved closer to him, and gently nipped at his lower lip, a playful but intimate action that she had never tried before, but discovered that she liked it.

Mike sighed into her mouth in contentment, and gently pulled on her lip with his teeth as well, an action that she found terribly intoxicating. She opened her mouth wider to grant the beckoning tongue of Mike's access, and they met in the middle, meshing into a single essence. She felt a growing presence of his fingers running along her bare stomach. His touch made her wild and she craved more. She gave a slight nod without breaking contact, and she felt Mike smile slightly into the kiss. His hands grew more adventurous as they slowly made their way up her torso, underneath her clothing.

As if high on a drug, El's thoughts became hazy as she cupped Mike's face in her hands, while his continued to ride upward toward her bra. And when his hands finally met them through the fabric, it gave her chills that made her flinch back for a moment. But as quick as she had parted from him, she returned, going back for more.

Mike continued to fondle and caress her breasts through the fabric of

the bra, but in that moment, he would have given anything to just rip it off. But he wasn't sure if El was at that point yet, and he did not want to cross any boundaries so soon after they had made up after being broken apart. So he decided on something else instead.

He broke away from this kiss and leaned down to the top of neck just below her ear and ran his tongue across the area in small strokes, punctuating the tongue movements with careful bites and kisses.

"Oh, Mike, that feels so good..." El breathed into his ear. "Go lower..."

He happily obliged, moving down her neck nearing her collarbone. He became acutely aware of the fact that he was drawing very close to the top of the breast. His arousal was intensifying by the second, and he was about to try to make the move when-

"What the hell are you guys-" Dustin flung open the door to the storage room, and Mike and El sprung away from one another like they were on fire. Dustin darted his eyes across the room, first at Mike, and then at El, who had a rather large bruise on the right side of her neck. The room was silent for a few moments.

"Okay," Dustin said, a humorous smile widening on his face while his eyebrows raised.. "I got you guys."

"What?" Mike asked, and looked over at El who was yanking her shirt back on, refusing to meet Dustin's gaze.

"I know what was going on here," Dustin smiled, crossing his arms. "And I said, I got you covered."

Mike still was not sure what his friend meant. "What are you covering us for?"

Dustin rolled his eyes. "If those guys knew what you guys were doing up here, they would tease you for weeks. *But*, I know how important this shit is. I was doing the same shit with Suzie during camp."

"Oh...okay," Mike said, noticing that his friend did have a point about everyone else teasing them. Though, he was having a hard time picturing Dustin making out with a girl in a dark room. "Well, thanks, dude."

"No problem, but still. Try to tone it down, will you?" he joked. "I haven't forgotten that you guys ditched us that day when we went to set up the Cerebro."

Mike felt a pang of guilt and instantly realized that he had never formally apologized to Dustin for doing that. His face flushed in embarrassment. He had to make things right with his friend, especially now that he was doing him a favor.

"El, could you go downstairs? Me and Dustin will grab the stuff, I just want to talk to him for a minute."

"Okay," El complied, and exited the room back to the basement.

"What's up? Dustin asked, turning his attention to Mike after El left.

"It occurred to me that I never really apologize dfor ditching you on that day," Mike said, scratching the back of his neck as he did so. "But I just wanted to tell you that a whole bunch of stuff happened while you were gone in the...the Russin base."

Dustin laughed dryly, recalling the hellish experience. "Oh?"

"Yeah, um..." he muttered, trying to think of a way to summarize what had happened. "Max and El became, like, best friends or something. And Max gave El some advice about stuff, and she, um...kind of dumped me."

"What?!" Dustin said loudly.

"Hey, shut up, calm the fuck down," Mike whispered aggressively, trying to keep their conversaton as lowkey as possible.

"Jeez, sorry, I just was *not* expecting to hear that on this Earth," Dustin smirked.

"Yeah, well, long story short, some feelings were exchanged, some stuff with Will and the rest of the party, and I can assure you that El and I will no longer be ditching you guys. I promise. And...I'm sorry for being such a dick. It was wrong of me and-"

"Mike," Dustin cut him off, seeing his characteristic nervous ramble

starting to come out. "It's fine, your forgiven." He stuck his hand out. "Shake?"

Mike beamed, and took his hand.

They shook.

Ten minutes later, the entire party was lying in various spots around the basement, on couches, chairs, and air mattresses, cuddled up in blankets and pillows. The sound of them all breathing was the only thing breaking the silence.

"Are any of you guys sleeping?" Max asked.

"No," everyone replied at the same time.

"I can't sleep," she said.

"Why not?" Lucas asked. It was dark. Max was not able to tell if Lucas was even looking at her, but she sensed that he was.

"Just...thinking." She chuckled to herself, and she almost could not even figure out why.

"Thinking about what?" Dustin joined the conversation.

She inhaled, and fiddled with the sleeve of her shirt. "Normal teenagers spend their days at the mall, or the movies, or just stupid teenager shit," she said with a sad smile, invisible to those around her. "We battle monsters from a different dimension, perform exorcisms and fight Russians."

The sentiment was met with dry chuckles and snickers. "What's fucking next? Dinosaurs? Time-traveling? Jesus Christ..." Mike said, drawing out more light laughter from the group.

"I think the only time I ever felt normal was in those six months," El thought aloud, followed by a snuffle.

"Don't worry," Will said back to her. "I think it's over now, for good."

"Let's hope so," Lucas replied.

Another wave of silence cascaded over the party as they continued to lie in the darkness, staring at the dark ceiling above them.

"I'll tell you one thing, though," Mike said. "All the stuff we've done, all the stuff we've gone through, there aren't any fucking people in the world that I would have rather done them with."

"Me neither," Dustin agreed.

"Yeah," Will said along with Dustin.

"We're like one big, fucked up family," Max joked, and everyone murmured in agreement humorously.

"I'm happy to call you guys my friends," El said, her voice almost breaking. "Family."

"I love you guys," Lucas spoke, and everyone turned to look at him. "Not in a romantic sexual way, just...brotherly love. Sisterly love."

"Like a family," Mike clarified for Lucas.

"Yeah, like that."

"Me too."

"You know, when I moved to this town, I thought you guys were the weirdest dudes in town. With those Ghostbuster costumes and shit, you looked like idiots," Max teased them. "But now...I gotta admit; I love you guys too."

Mike realized that as much as him and Max had never really been able to find common ground, with everything about El, Mike realized that, even if it had not started out that way, Max was a part of the Party now. Maybe he was wrong about her... she did want the best for El, and he had recently come to realize that he had been entirely too possessive of her in the recent months. And she was the girlfriend of one of his best friends, the best friend of his girlfriend. Maybe he could start trying to build some kind of mutual friendship with her. "Me too, Zoomer."

There was a lapse in the conversation for a millisecond, and then, "I

can't even remember what class you are, but yeah, you too, Mike."

"Yeah," Will said. "Same goes for me."

"Yup," from Dustin.

"Me as well," El said.

In El's mind, she started to think. She thought about all the people who were with her, people who cared for her and loved each other, and would always be there for one another, no matter what. She thought of all they had endured and all they had accomplished, and how much they meant to her.

She stood up and walked to the middle of the room. Looking down, she was able to vaguely make out the silhouettes of her friends lying on the ground below her.

"If he comes back," she announced, her voice shaky. "If the Mindlayer comes back, promise...promise that we will all work together to stop him. Promise."

Mike stared at his girlfriend, standing above him, in the middle of the rest of the people in the room. He stood up and grabbed her hand firmly in his grasp. "I promise."

Max stood up immediately after and grabbed El's other hand. "I promise."

Lucas, seeing his girlfriend join them, stood up after her. He took her hand. "I promise."

Then Dustin. "I promise."

Then Will got up, and moved in between Mike and Dustin, and latched onto their hands

with both of his. And then he said the two words that meant so much to the party.

"I promise."

A little bit of "It" vibes, don't you think? Thanks for the support, remember to leave a review with your thoughts, suggestions and criticisms. :)

9. Chapter 9

After a good night's sleep, Jonathan woke up and decided to approach his Mom about his idea to invite El to come live with them. He was confident that it was a great idea, and he knew that if they all worked together they could pull it off financially. He flicked his eyes toward the digital clock on his nightstand and read 9:04. He crawled out from under the sheets, his body stiff as board.

"Ugh," he groaned, stretching out, hearing his back crack with satisfaction. He shuffled out the door and to the kitchen. He found his Mom and the dining table, her eyes half closed eating a bowl of cereal. She looked up at him and smiled groggily.

"Hi, sweetie," she greeted. "Good sleep?"

"Yeah, you?"

She chuckled. "Like a log, but I don't feel too great now. I think I had too much to drink last night."

Jonathan frowned. "You gotta watch it, Mom. You have work today, right?"

"Yeah, I have have to be there at ten," she replied, dodging her son's comment about her drinking. But when she finally looked him in the eye, she gave an exasperated sigh. "I know, I know, I'm sorry, Jonathan."

He walked over to her and leaned down to hug her. "It's okay, Mom, but just...don't overdo it, alright?"

"Yes, okay. I promise."

Jonathan poured himself some cereal, and sat beside his Mom in at the table. "Hey, Mom, I was, uh," he started, having trouble to find a way to break down the barrier. "I was wondering if I could talk to you about something?"

Joyce looked up from her cereal, and gave her son a warm smile. "Of course, sweetie, what's on your mind?"

Jonathan pursed his lips, and stirred his cereal in his bowl, deep in contemplation. "I was thinking about El, and her situation with...you know, Hop, and I...I thought it might be a good idea."

"For her to come live with us?" Joyce finished the sentence. Jonathan looked up in surprise. "Yeah, I was thinking about it last night, too."

"Except you were drunk."

"Yes, but, I still think it's a good idea. We can work it out. And I have something else in mind too, something that might help us with that."

"With what?"

"El coming to live with us."

"Why do we need help? There's nothing wrong right now."

Joyce chewed her bottom lip. She was nervous about bringing this up with Jonathan. But she knew that he had to know. "I've been looking into selling the house. So we can get some money to move somewhere else, maybe a little bit better."

Jonathan did not speak for a moment. He just stared at her, as if the wheels in his brain were still turning, processing what she had said. He opened his mouth but did not say anything. He closed it, then opened it once again, but this time was able to form a sentence.

"So you're telling me that...that you want to move?" His emotions were hard to read. She couldn't tell if he was upset, or angry, or happy about it. She did not like that. She was used to being able to read both of her kids like books.

"I'm telling you that we are *going* to move. For sure. I just need to find a good enough place. I already have some ideas."

Once again, Jonathan sat there, indifference spread across his face. He looked down at his cereal, which was growing more soggy and soft by the second. His eyes once again met Joyce's. And they didn't look happy.

"We're moving," he repeated, incredulous.

"Yes, sweetie," she replied. "What do you think?" She moved to gently grab Jonathan's hand on the table, but as soon as she made contact, he yanked it away instantaneously, as if she were carrying some contagious disease.

"I'm leaving," he said, trying to prevent himself from breaking down in front of his Mom. He was seven-fucking-teen years old, he was past having tantrums in front of his Mommy. He walked briskly to his room and slid on some jeans over his pajama boxers. He didn't even bother putting on a proper shirt, he just kept on the plain white t-shirt that he was wearing. He walked toward the door and started putting his shoes on.

"Baby, where are you going?" Joyce asked, walking toward her son. She felt her heart sinking, eating away at her. If this was how Jonathan was taking the news, she was terrified of even bringing the idea up to Will.

"I don't know," Jonathan replied, tears already starting to form in the corners of his eyes.

"So why are you leaving?" She was turning desperate, Jonathan could tell.

"Because I don't want to be here right now." He stepped out and slammed the door loudly behind him, and didn't look back. He heard the door once again open behind him, and the calls of Joyce rang in his ears, but he didn't listen. He moved as quickly as he could down the driveway without running, and stepped into the car and started the engine. He drove off, and that was when he stopped fighting it.

His vision became blurred as salty liquid started collecting in his eyes, and he tried furiously to blink them away but his efforts were in vain. He realized that if he continued driving like he would get into an accident, so he slammed down on the brakes and pulled over on the shoulder of the country road that he was on. He put the car in park and rested his head on the steering wheel. His shoulders shook violently as he desperately tried to drain himself of his emotions, to try to get control of himself for long enough to form a coherent thought in his mind.

Why on Earth would his Mom want to move? And more than that, why would she El to move with them? *El*, of all people. The only people she had ever known were here, in Hawkins. All the people who cared for her and knew about her true past were here, not in some town in another state. And most of all...Mike.

Jesus Christ, moving away from Mike was going to destroy her. It wasn't like Jonathan knew very much about the state of their relationship, but he knew even before Independence Day how strong their bond was. And seeing how they interacted during those days when they were fighting the Mindflayer had only reinforced those thoughts. And now with Hopper gone, Mike truly was her last and only lifeline; and now it was going to be torn away from her.

Then he thought of Nancy. Dear God, Nancy...he loved her, even though he hadn't told her so yet. And the thought of leaving her behind made him sick. And what was all this for? Probably some bullshit like "to get a fresh start" or something. He never understood what people meant when they said that. He knew that his Mom has endured her fair share of challenges, but hadn't they all? And wouldn't running away from their problems only make it worse? And all the people who knew what they had been through were with them already. They had the support of all of those who had been there; all the kids, Steve, Robin (even though he didn't know her that well)...

Were they really better off in some random town with random people who didn't know a goddamn thing? He didn't think so.

Sucking in a deep breath, now fresh out of tears to cry, he turned the car on again and started to drive. He was going to pick up Will from the Wheeler's.

Will jolted awake. He found himself lying on the air mattress that had been given to him by Mike the night before, nestled underneath a blanket. He looked around, trying to identify what had woken him up, and his eyes fell on Mike, who was crouched over him, hand on his shoulder.

"Mike? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Your brother is here to pick you up."

"What time is it?"

"Noon. I think something is wrong, he seemed a little bit upset."

Hearing this, Will sat up rather quickly. "Is he at the front door?"

"Yeah, your clothes are on the table over there," Mike replied, indicating toward the pile of clothing that was slumped on the piece of furniture.

After getting changed quickly and saying goodbye to Mrs Wheeler on his way out, Will joined his brother outside and walked to his car. They got in, and Jonathan started driving, but something was off about him. Mike was right; something was wrong.

"Jonathan?" Will said, turning to look at his brother.

"What's up, bud?" Jonathan replied, not taking his eyes off the road.

"Is something wrong?" Will analyzed Jonathan's face, but it was hard to gauge what he was feeling. Jonathan sighed and looked out the window opposite to Will.

"No, I'm just thinking about work."

Will knew that Jonathan had been fired from his job at the post; they had had a discussion a few days ago about it. But he had a nagging sensation on the back of his mind that there was something else happening with Jonathan that he could not quite put his finger on.

"Are you sure?" Will pressed, trying to figure out if Jonathan was hiding anything. "Did something happen with Mom?"

"No," Jonathan responded quickly, almost before he had even finished his last word. He had spoken rather loudly as well, and it had startled Will. He narrowed his eyes slightly, but then gave up, and looked out the window on his side. Jonathan would talk to him when he wanted to about his problem, and he would just have to-

"Mom told me that we're moving."

Will's heart stopped. What? They were moving? "Pardon?"

Jonathan cleared his throat and visibly swallowed hard. "I was eating breakfast with Mom, and, uh..." his voice fizzled out, momentarily, before finding it again. "She told me that she was looking for a new house. We're gonna sell ours, and move away."

Will was speechless. "Not only that," Jonathan continued, laughing in spite of himself. Almost out of anger. "But guess what? After I mentioned to Mom that we should invite El to come to live with us, you know what her idea was? Bring her with us."

Will blinked, already feeling a swelling bulge in his throat. "El?"

"Yeah," he said. "Hopper is dead. I thought it would be a good idea for us to take her in, give her a home. Mom agreed with me, said she had been thinking about it too. Except in her version, we drag her out of Hawkins, and toward whatever *fucking* hellhole we're going to."

Will was stunned. How could his Mom possibly think that moving away was a good idea? Their roots were in Hawkins, their friends and family were in Hawkins. And El had made a life here, a life that she would never be able to get back if they left. And she had made that life with Mike, and Max, and the rest of the party. Sure, Hopper was gone, but she still had her friends.

"I can tell that you're upset about this," Jonathan said, wiping his eyes with the back of his wrist while driving. Will noticed that they were no longer traveling in the direction of their house, but he did not say anything. "I am too."

"But how upset are you?" Will asked. Jonathan turned at the next intersection and remained silent for a few seconds.

"Really upset," he replied. "I don't want to leave behind what we have here."

Will looked forward out the windshield, down the road that they were traveling on. "Me too," he choked, now feeling his emotions overtake him.

Jonathan realized this, but for once in his life, he made no move to

try to comfort him. How could he when he was in as big of a wreck as Will was? And the sight of seeing Will beside him in the passenger seat made him want to punch a hole through the glass in front of him. But he knew he couldn't do that.

So instead, he pulled over for the second time that day. And when he did that, Will leaned into him from across the car, and Jonathan clung onto him in reciprocation, and they both cried together.

They stayed like that for a while.

It was half-past twelve when Max started walking home from Mike's house. She had successfully evaded Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler; the sight of seeing a girl coming out of the basement from a sleepover was one that would have caused a lot of problems. She had left El in the basement; after inviting her over to her house, El told her that she wanted to spend some of her free time reading through the magazines that she had given her the previous day. Mike had gone back to bed, so she wanted to take advantage of the alone time.

Max understood this. She knew that El wanted to start exploring stuff with Mike, and she couldn't blame her, as she had already begun to start trying things with Lucas; the boy who was currently walking beside her on her way to her house. They were hand in hand, enjoying the afternoon air. There was a cool breeze blowing through Hawkins, so it wasn't too hot to be outside. Although, she was looking forward to getting back to her house to have some alone time with Lucas.

"When are your parents getting home?" Lucas asked her.

Max turned her head sideways to return his gaze. "Later today, I think. You have to be gone by then."

A familiar pang of sadness and anger jabbed at Lucas's gut when he heard Max say those words. Not at her, of course, but her stepdad. He was not blind to the fact that Max lived in a very racist household. The attitude of Billy stemmed from his Dad. And because of him, he still remained a mystery to her parents. Max did not want to tell her Mom about him because, even though she would be fine with it, she would be putting her in an awkward situation with Neil, and she did

not want to do that.

It pained her to have to force her boyfriend to date her through a series of lies and deception, but Lucas insisted to her that it was fine.

They reached the front of Max's house, and when they saw that there were no cars in the driveway, walked toward the door. Max unlocked the door with her key and stepped inside.

"You want some food? We never got breakfast at Mike's," she offered.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Lucas replied. "What do you have?"

"I was just gonna make some toast."

"I'll have some too, then."

After getting it prepared, the two of them sat at the dining table in silence. Max's thoughts started to drift again toward Billy and her parents. In probably a few hours, her parents would come home, expecting to find Billy and Max in the house, all fine and well. Instead, they would find a letter in the mail saying that their eldest son had passed away in a fire at the mall and that Max had been left all alone for four days.

It scared her to think about how they would react.

"Hey," Lucas said, reaching over the table to put his hand on hers. "You okay? You're not eating, and you've been like, silent, for like an hour."

Max looked at him, and then back at her untouched toast. "My parents are gonna be here later today," she said. "And they're gonna come here, and expect everything to be normal but they're not."

Lucas's face turned serious, and he squeezed her hand. "Hey," he comforted. "It's gonna be fine. It's not like they'll be mad at you, you didn't do anything wrong."

Max sniffed, trying to hold back her crying. She didn't want to embarrass herself right now. "I know, but...they're gonna be so mad and upset. And what if they take it out on me, or something? My

stepdad isn't going to have Billy anymore. What if he turns to me?"

Lucas responded immediately. "He won't do that, he can't. Your his wife's kid."

"So?"

"So he won't do anything to you. And if he gives you a hard time, talk to your Mom. She cares about you." Max still didn't look so sure.

"And if you want to leave, get out of the house...you can always come to my place. My parents love you, and I will never say no to spending more time with you."

"They wouldn't me live with you."

"Yeah, but they'll still let you stay here as much as you want," he reminded her.

Max's lips curled upward slightly. "I'm so lucky," she sighed.

"Why?" Lucas asked, confused.

"Because of you," she said back, and before he could say anything more her lips were on his. After a few seconds, she pulled away. "Jesus, that was cheesy. I'm sorry," she giggled.

"No," he said. "It was nice. Cheesy isn't always a bad thing, you know."

He leaned in to kiss her again, but she grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and restrained him before he could make contact. Lucas made a mock-hurt face. "What?"

"Want to take this somewhere else that's not the dining room?" she asked, a devilish smile playing at her mouth.

"What did you have in mind?" Lucas questioned, standing up.

"How about my bedroom? Hm?" she asked, growing increasingly flirty.

"Sounds good to me."

Pulling him by the hand, Max dragged her boyfriend down the hall, and into her room.

When they were inside, she closed the door, almost out of habit; she knew that no one was in the house to find them. Lucas had barely sat down on the bed before Max had thrown herself on top of him, straddling his hips. She leaned down and latched her mouth onto the dark skin at his neck, and began to suck the skin. She began to deliver small and smooth licks, with was met with a content sigh. She moved up and lightly nipped at his ear, an action that elicited further groans from Lucas. She traveled along his neck, and started to grind her hips on his body where she felt a growing hardness.

She felt herself getting more and more wet with each passing second. Desire was bubbling within her, and she knew what she wanted. Although, she was not sure if Lucas would be willing to do what she wanted him to do.

But she was pleasantly surprised when Lucas placed his hands firmly on her hips and moved her to the side, and rolled over on top of her. He gently started thrusting into her. Although they were separated by their clothing, the feeling of his dick jabbing into her crotch rendered her breathless.

"Oh, Lucas, that feels so good..." she moaned into his ear and gave it another soft affectionate nibble.

Lucas's head was swimming in testosterone at that moment. He wanted to take her pants off, but he really did not want to overstep any boundaries or make her feel uncomfortable. But he was grinding against her really hard now, and he could tell from her reaction that she liked it a lot.

But before he had to make the decision himself, he felt Max's hands leave his back and come down to her own pants, and she lifted her hips up to slide the clothing off her legs. He stopped moving against her for a few moments to allow her to wiggle out of the pants, and as soon as they were past her ankles and off her body, he threw himself back onto her with a newfound hunger and lust.

It was now his turn to give attention to her neck, giving deep kisses and nips and licks all over the left side of it. Max moaned lightly. It felt really nice, but she needed something more...

She nervously grabbed his hand and directed it down to her crotch. She placed Lucas's hand right on her vagina, only being covered by her wet panties. She felt Lucas freeze on top of her. Her heart stopped, and she thought she had made a mistake by making that move. But her mind went from panic to heaven when she felt Lucas started to clumsily rub her. Obviously he had never done it before, and yet...the sensation was incredible. It was so much different when she had done it herself, and it made her mind turn to mush.

He pressed right against her opening. Pleasantly surprised, she bucked her head upward and gasped. "Oh, yeah..." He started to stroke upward and downward, in between her folds, and gently grazing across her clitoris when he reached the apex of the stroke. Whether he was touching the clit intentionally or not (probably not), at that moment, Max was in heaven. But, she knew that with some direction, it could be even better.

"Lucas, go under," she murmured in between satisfied moans.

"What?" Lucas asked, a hint of confusion in his tone.

Without bothering to speak, Max slid her panties off, leaving her completely exposed for Lucas to see. She kicked them off, and they landed on the floor by her bed. Meanwhile, her boyfriend was looking at her, completely paralyzed.

"Holy shit," he breathed.

"Smooth," Max teased and pulled him on top of her again. Their lips once again started their aggressive dance of passion. Lucas's fingers ever-so-slightly touched her bare pussy, and she moaned loudly into the kiss, growing more and more turned on by the millisecond.

Lucas, at the moment, was scared. Scared, but at the same time, in ecstasy. He had never fingered a girl before. He had never even touched one before. And he had only seen them in Playboy magazines that he had snuck around his parents. So to be in this

situation, with a sexually starved girl underneath him was both a dream and a nightmare. He decided to try the most logical thing, and just started rubbing in the general area with his ring and middle finger. They moved between the delicate lips, growing more and more slick with her juices. He started applying more pressure.

In response, Max started to raise and lower her hips to meet his hand, which Lucas took as a sign that he was doing at least something right. But he soon realized that keeping up this charade while in their current position was going to be a herculean task. His arm was already cramping. To mitigate this, as gracefully as he could, he shifted to the right of her so that he was lying right beside her, so his arm had more room to maneuver. He focused his mouth on the side of the neck. He found this position to be a lot easier to maintain.

Feeling his heart pounding in his chest, he slowly eased his index finger into her hole. "Oh, *shit!*" Lucas jumped and practically ripped away from her. "Jesus, oh my God, Max, I'm so sorry, I-"

"Jesus, stalker, shut up," Max laughed.

"Huh?"

"You didn't hurt me," she said, exasperated. Lucas opened his mouth to reply, but Max cut him off again. "Just keep going."

Lucas nodded and leaned back in. He kissed her a few times, then leaned back and focused all his attention on her pussy.

His fingers were now sort of dry, so he rubbed them along her folds to lubricate them for easier penetration. Once he was satisfied with his teasing, he slipped a single finger into her. She gasped again but this time he didn't pull back. He kept going in and out, slowly and surely, moving at a pace not too fast but not too slow. The feeling of her walls tightly gripping his digit was amazing; it was so soft and warm and nice.

"Two," she breathed. Granting her wish, Lucas added his middle finger next to his pointer finger. Max was so tight, and it made his dick so hard, watching himself pleasure her like this, her tight pussy squeezing his fingers.

But he still did not really have any idea what to do besides thrusting in and out. So he decided that he would do some experimenting, to see what was good and what was bad. He inserted his fingers as far as they would go so that the entirety of his fingers were now buried in her.

Max let out a high-pitched moan. "Oh, yeah...Curl...oh fuck- curl your fingers, okay," she managed to say in between her vocalizations. Following her instructions, Lucas curled his two fingers inside her and felt the soft ceiling of her cervix. "Ohhhh, *fuck*."

His confidence now flying, he started to roughly rub the inside of her vagina, trying to induce as much friction as possible. "Oh, that feels so good, Lucas, keep going, keep going," Max keened.

Lucas suddenly remembered something that he read in a Playboy magazine; the clitoris. He had heard about in sex ed, but it only really stuck with him after he read it in the magazine. He knew that if he could find it and stimulate it, he would be giving her the greatest kind of pleasure known to womankind. But he had also heard from his sources that, apparently, it was really hard to find.

He started alternating between penetration and rubbing her pussy, trying to find a way to access the sacred spot. He spread her labia and lips, and tried massaging just above the hole, and inched higher and higher, trying to locate it. And suddenly he felt something; almost like a small nub, nestled right underneath the flaps of skin, small and firm. And when he touched it, he saw Max claw her hands around the bedsheets and squeeze them, and her eyes almost shot open.

"Oh, FUCK!" she nearly screamed. "Oh fuck, fuck fuck, Lucas, yes, keep going, yes..."

Lucas continued to alternate between rubbing her inner walls and teasing her clitoris, determined to get her to reach her breaking point.

"Lucas, I'm close."

He kept going, his fingers were burning from exhaustion, but he was

determined to get Max to reach her climax before he stopped. Her breath continued to become more and more rapid and shallow. And then, finally, the breaking point was reached and she exploded.

"Oh, *fuck*, Lucas, shit!" she hummed, and then pulled his face in to kiss him hard, to thank him for granting her that spectacular release. She broke away; it was not a long kiss, and then looked at him. "That was amazing."

"I'm glad," Lucas smiled at her. And with a laugh, he added, "if I'm honest, I didn't really know what I was doing at first."

"Well, you did very good," she replied with a sweet smile on her face. And she brought him into a loving hug. They spent the rest of the afternoon lying on top of her bedsheets, and enjoying each other's presence.

And for the first time in four days, Max was fully and completely happy.

10. Chapter 10

Max had received a phone call from her Mom in California, telling her that their flight back home was delayed. Rather than arriving on the current day, the eighth of July, they would be coming on the morning of the ninth. Max had no problem with this; it meant she could enjoy a couple more hours without living in the hell that would surely arise when they returned. And she could spend more time freely with Lucas in her house, which was an opportunity that did not arise often at all.

The two of them had a relaxed rest of their afternoon and evening. They had gone for a walk in the woods and even swam at the quarry with one another, and had gone back to their house and had made a rudimentary dinner of Kraft Dinner.

And after a movie and a little bit of fooling around, they had gone to sleep, the two of them in Max's bed.

Lucas was in the middle of a very pleasant dream; he was hanging out with all the guys, and they were all in Mike's basement. They were doing regular guy shit; watching movies, talking about girls, eating junk food. But in his dream, a sudden banging started echoing off the walls of the basement. Then a voice started calling out; *"Max! Max! Max!"*

"MAX!?" Lucas's eyes shot open and he sprang out of the bed, only wearing his boxers and the shirt he had been wearing last night. The calling for Max's name continued before he heard another voice. "Oh, for God's sake, Neil, I have the key, calm down..."

Lucas's heart dropped. Her parents were home, and he was still here. He heard the door being unlocked, and realizing that he did not have a moment to spare, he sprung into action. He jolted Max awake by violently shaking her shoulder. He stirred. "Jesus, Lucas, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"Your parents are home!" he hissed. "Keep your voice down!"

"Oh, *fuck!*"

He ran to the other side of his room and grabbed his clothes and bag. "I'm leaving, out the window. Don't tell them I was here."

"No shit, dumbass," Max said sarcastically. Lucas didn't take the rude comment to heart; she was not a morning person at all, and it didn't help that her parents were currently standing under the same roof as he was.

"Okay, bye. Good luck," Lucas whispered, before flinging himself out of the open window, and taking off across the lawn in only his sleepwear.

Max watched the rather comical sight of her boyfriend running through the grass and along the street wearing his boxers, but it was early morning on Sunday, and the streets were dead. No one was going to be out to see him. As soon as he disappeared from sight, she heard a knock on her bedroom door. "Max? Sweetie, are you still in bed?"

It was her Mom. "No, Mom, I just woke up," she replied. The door opened, and her Mom stepped in quickly and gave her daughter a hug. "Oh, sweetie, it's so good to see you, I missed you so much."

"I missed you, too, Mom," she replied, squeezing her Mother tight in her arms. As much as she enjoyed the period of time with unlimited freedom when her parents were gone, she was certainly glad to have her Mom back. That would also mean proper food again.

"Where's Neil?" Max asked once they had separated from their embrace.

"I think he's checking the mail, he'll be in soon." Max's breath caught in her throat when she heard her say that. She braced herself for what was about to come; there was only one thing that he could be looking at from the mail right now.

She heard loud footsteps coming from the front door, and they grew louder and louder as they approached her room. Neil stepped into the room, holding a piece of paper. There was an incredulous look swept across his face like he was looking at something he did not understand.

"Neil? What's wrong?" Susan asked. Max felt the tears start to form in the corner of her eyes, and she knew that soon she would be helpless to stop what was going to happen. She decided that it would be best for her to leave the room before anything else happened, because she did NOT want to be here when the shit hit the fan.

"I need to use the bathroom, I'll be right back," she announced, her voice slightly shaky. She stepped up hurriedly leave the room and made toward the bathroom briskly. But then Neil stepped sideways and blocked the doorway. He looked directly at Max, who was not able to meet his eye.

He took a deep breath. "Did you know about this?" he asked her. He did not sound angry. It's not like she anticipated him to be angry; she knew that he would never lay a finger on her because she was not his child, she was his wife's.

"Yes," she whispered, still gazing at the floor.

"How did it happen?"

"Doesn't it say in the letter?"

Like lightning, Neil's hand shot out from where it was position against his side and struck Max across the face. Right on the bruise from Billy hitting her a few days ago, at that. It felt like a cement block crushing her right in her head, and she nearly fell over.

"Don't fucking talk back to me," he said. It was quiet and seemed void of all emotion. It was the same way that he spoke with Billy. It was haunting. "If you use that lip with me again, you'll be getting a lot more than just a fucking slap."

Max started to cry. Not just little tears, or a brewing sadness within her, but it only took a few moments for her to start bawling right in front of her Dad. And she hated herself for it, hated herself so much. She looked over at her Mom, who was standing in the corner of the room, jaw open, paralyzed with fear. And she knew why; besides the obvious that he hurt her daughter, but the fact that never *once* had Neil hit Max. Never.

Neil started to walk out of the room. "What about? Anything from you, whore?" Susan did not reply.

He strode out of the room, leaving Max and her mother together. Horror and shock hung in the air like toxic gas. And at the moment,

Max made a decision.

She was going to run away from home.

So, through the flurry of tears rushing down her face, she pulled herself off the floor. And as soon as she put her weight on her feet, her head started throbbing unbearably. She touched her cheek and felt that it was sticky. She moved her fingers away and saw blood. Neil's watch must have broken the skin. It had stung severely when she had touched it. She bit down on her lip to stop her from whimpering in pain, not wanting to show any ounce of weakness to anyone. Even if it was just her Mom.

"Max?" her mother choked out, barely able to form words. "Max, are you okay?"

She ignored her. Without looking in her direction, she went to the closet and grabbed her backpack, and some clothes. She started putting them in her bag. "Max, what are you doing?"

Still ignoring her, she made for the bathroom to grab some toiletries that she thought she would need. "Max, what are you doing.?"

"I'm getting the fuck out of here," she spat at her. She was absolutely furious with her life right now, and furious with her mom. How the fuck could she have married such a despicable, hateful, evil fucking man? "Fucking anywhere is better than FUCKING here."

"Max, you can't leave. Where are you going to go?" she asked, visibly fighting tears.

"I don't care. I'm leaving."

"So what? You're gonna leave me by myself, here?"

Max turned around, just inches away from your window, about to

climb out. And what she broke her heart, but also set it on fire with rage at the same time. Her mom looked like she was about to shatter at any moment. Over her eyes, there was pain written in so many layers she could not believe. She of course loved her Mom, but in the end, it was her fault that this prick asshole was in their lives.

"Yes," she replied, her voice breaking. "Yes, I am."

And she stepped out of the window and ran.

"What do you think about El living with us?" Jonathan asked Will.

They were currently in the forest, rebuilding castle Byers. Jonathan was hammering a two-by-four into the ground, and Will was salvaging leftover wood from the demolition site. The site of the ruined Castle Byers had nearly made him cry. Thinking back to the night where he had been so blinded with rage and sadness that he had taken it down with a baseball bat. And as soon as Jonathan had heard about had happened, he insisted that they go to rebuild it.

"I think it's a really good idea," Will replied. "But not if we are going to be moving away."

Jonathan chewed the inside of his lip. He recalled the events of the day in his head silently. After they had parked the car and cried for nearly an hour, Jonathan had driven near the forest and parked the car, and they have ventured out to rebuild Castle Byers.

"That's the problem I see," Jonathan said. "If I'm honest, I'm not even that upset that *we're* moving. I can drive probably to visit Nancy, and I can take you with me. But we aren't the ones that are orphaned, and we aren't the ones who have a boyfriend here that literally is our only lifeline. I don't even know the two of them that well, and even I can tell how close Mike and El are."

"It's gonna destroy her," Will confirmed. "I've seen them for the last six months together, they might as well share the same organs. It's gross."

"Hey, it's not gross," Jonathan laughed. "They're really cute. It's nice."

"It's not nice when it means you can't do anything fun. It was really

annoying for a while."

"What changed?"

"What?"

Jonathan turned to look directly at his brother. "You said that it *was* really annoying. Is it still annoying?" Will pondered his words. It was true that the last six months for him were agonizing; he had watched El take his best friend completely away from him. But, he did feel that after their exchange a few days ago when Mike apologized, things were going to be different. So even though he had been mad, he was not anymore.

"We talked it out, I guess. He apologized, we reached a compromise and shook hands. It was fine."

Jonathan nodded. "Good. It would be a shame for you and Mike to stop being friends just because one of you has a girlfriend." Will agreed with his brother's sentiment.

They continued to work on the castle, not talking for a little while. "Where do you think we are going to move?" Will asked.

"I'm not sure," Jonathan sighed, placing his hands on his hips. "I hope nowhere too far because then I won't be able to come to visit that often. I still want to be able to see Nancy."

"Well," Will said. "Wherever we go, I just hope El will be okay. Even though I don't like that she took Mike for so long from us, I still care for her a lot. She saved my life."

"She saved all of our lives," Jonathan nodded to Will.

"Do you think we could change Mom's mind?" Will asked.

Jonathan was about to reply to Will when he heard some rustling in the woods behind him, a faint sound that he almost didn't hear. He looked around but did not see anything at that moment. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah, I did," Will said, looking equally as concerned. His head

swiveled on his shoulders trying to pinpoint what had made the sound. Then his question was answered.

"Will?" He whipped around toward the female voice that had said his name.

And it was Max. "Max? What are doing here?"

"I need help," she panted. She had clearly been running for a long time.

"What the hell are you doing way the hell out here?" Jonathan chuckled, approaching her. His face grew more worried when he saw her face. "And what happened to your cheek? Are you okay?"

Max gave him a pained expression. "I'm fine, I just needed to get out of my house. The circumstances were kind of...bad." Will sensed that there was more to this story then Max was openly telling her.

"But why are you out here in the woods? I would have guessed that you would have gone to Lucas's or something."

"I was going to," she replied, still out of breath. "But I was running, and I just went into the woods, and then I got turned around. I couldn't find my way out."

"Why were you running into the woods?"

Max's face seemed to glaze over when Will had asked that question, and he sensed that something bad was going on. "Just some trouble with my parents...is all," Max told him. He was still skeptical.

"I can give you a ride to Lucas's, Max, if you want." Jonathan offered. "I think Will and I were going to start heading back anyway."

"That would be great, thank you," Max said gratefully.

Max had been silent the entire drive to Lucas's. Will nor Jonathan had attempted to make conversation with her and had the right of mind to know not to try to prod her. She seemed very distressed.

They pulled up to the front of Lucas's home. "Thanks for the ride."

She got out before Jonathan could even say "You're welcome."

She nearly ran to the front door of Lucas's house but did not want to fully run because

that would have looked like some baby running to her mommy. And she didn't want to look like a baby in front of anyone but Lucas right now. She needed to be with him so bad.

She rapped her knuckles on the door, hoping that she would be greeted by Lucas and not one of his parents. She probably did not look her best right now. She sighed thankfully when Lucas pulled back the wooden door and stood there in the doorway. "Max? What are you doing here? What happened to your face?"

She looked back and saw that Jonathan and Will were still watching, probably making sure that she would get inside okay. "Let's talk inside, please?" Lucas nodded in compliance and stepped sideways to allow her entry. He waved at the Byers brothers and closed the door.

"Why did-?"

Max had already thrown herself around into Lucas, squeezing him relentlessly, still fighting the tears that threatened to break through her eyes. She was not quite sure why she was fighting it; probably because she did not want to look like a *complete* pussy in front of Lucas. "Are your parents home?"

"Uh, no, my Dad's at work and my Mom and sister are out. What's going on Max?" he pressed away, forcing her to meet his concerned eyes.

"My parents came home," she replied, still trying to push down the lump in her throat. "It was... *FUCK!*"

Lucas jumped back at her sudden outburst. "Jesus Christ, Max, just tell me what happened, it's okay. Just calm down."

Max fought with herself, and she managed to bring down her blood pressure, which she almost felt increasing by the second. "And what happened to your face?"

"Take a guess," she spat, moving toward the fridge to get some long-needed ice to put on her face.

Lucas did not like where this was going. He thought that her parents would never do anything to Max, *especially* her stepdad because she was not even his daughter. But he expected that something bad had happened; and in spite of his previous notion, he had a deep, unsettling feeling that he was wrong. "It was your stepdad, wasn't?"

Max did not meet his eye, nor did she speak. "But why?" he asked.

"I don't fucking know," she cried out, throwing the ice tray on the floor of Lucas's, and bits of ice scattered across the hardwood floor. "I'm not going back to that fucking shithole *again!*"

"Okay, it's fine, you can stay here for as long as you want," Lucas soothed. He almost said *and stop making a mess* but he fancied the idea of staying alive. "Let me get you some ice, sit on the couch."

Max nodded, and shuffled over to the living room, her hand covering her bloody cheek. "You should clean that up a little bit, do you want help?" Lucas asked, noticing that her

skin was still cut open and seemed to be bleeding a little bit.

Max had no idea where Lucas kept all the medical stuff in his house. Although she was not really in the mood to be helped and coddled by Lucas right now, she caved. "Yes please."

"Okay, go to the bathroom," he told her, and she obliged. Lucas walked through the door a couple of seconds after she did, and he reached under the sink and got some disinfectant and a cloth. He poured out some of the disinfectant onto the rag and dabbed it on her cheek. Her eyes were glazed over and unfocused, and Lucas could not tell what she was thinking. She was completely zoned out from the world.

When he finished dabbing the wound, he looked at her. "Max? Are you there?"

Silence for a few moments, then she replied. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not like I can just go back there, Lucas. You have no idea what my house is like right now," she said, near the edge of tears. "I told my Mom I was leaving."

"Well, you did leave. I'm confused."

"I meant that I was running away. That's the meaning that I was trying to get across. I don't know if that's the message my Mom got, but..."

Lucas was floored. "Why would you want to run away, Max?! That's insane!"

"How it insane?" Max shot back, her temper flaring immediately. "Do you have any fucking idea what is like being in that room with my Mom and Dad, when they found out that Billy had died? Do you know what it's like being in the same house as that fucking disgusting excuse for a human being? I didn't even fucking know he had any good feelings for Billy, but apparently he did, and now that he's gone he's gonna take all his shit out on me and my Mom, and I don't want to fucking be there for that."

Lucas was taken aback by the hostility that was laced in Max's words. He immediately felt bad for scolding her for running away. "Jesus Christ, Max, I'm so sorry, I didn't...I didn't know it was that bad."

"*Look at me!*" she yelled, pointing at her face. "You see this bloody gash?! You see the bump right underneath it?! Do you also see the tears coming out of my eyes right now!? God FUCKING DAMNIT!" she screamed and stormed out of the bathroom pushing Lucas out of the way.

"Where are you going?" he called out in exasperation.

"Well, nowhere outside this house!" she yelled back sarcastically. "What am I gonna do? Go back to my house?"

"No, I don't want to go back to your house, you can stay here for as long as you want-"

"So why are you treating me like this?" she interrupted him, practically flaming with anger and frustration.

"Like what?" Lucas asked, becoming increasingly frustrated at Max's seemingly radical behavior.

"Like I'm retarded or something for running away from my house! The first thing you said when I told you was, 'you ran away?' Like I was stupid for doing it, or something!"

"Well, of course, I was a little bit surprised!" Lucas said back, his voice rising although not intentionally. "That was kind of a bombshell you dropped!"

"So the fuck what? I would have thought that you would be glad that I'm leaving that place!"

"But are you really leaving for good? Do you actually think this is gonna work out?"

Max was silent for a moment. She considered the words of her boyfriend, even though part of her was honestly considering breaking up with him at this fucking point, with everything that she was feeling right now. But in her heart, she knew he was probably right. This was going to be something that she would try to do at first, but then she would realize that she needed to go home, or the police would get involved, or some other bullshit.

But at least for now, she wasn't going to think about that; right now, she was running away from home, and that was what she was going to tell Lucas, without a hint of a question in her voice.

"It's going to work out. I'll think of something."

Lucas knew she was lying. But he knew that right now, *especially* right now, all she needed was his support. She would come to reason eventually, so... "Alright, alright, just...calm down, okay? I'm sorry."

"Thank you," Max said, returning to a calm state again.

Lucas paused to think. "What are you going to do now?" he asked her, already suspecting her answer.

She looked at her shoes sheepishly. "I was hoping to spend some time here, at least just for a little bit."

"Uh-huh," Lucas said, a smirk crawling itself onto his face quickly. "Of course you can stay here. For as long as I can hide you, at least."

"Hide me? Your parents are fine with me, you don't have to hide me."

"But if you're gonna sleep here, that won't go over well."

"I was actually planning on..." Max trailed off, realizing that she did not have a plan. "Yeah, you need to hide me. Sorry, Stalker."

Lucas laughed. "Let's go to the basement."

Lucas listened carefully to Max as she recalled the exact events that had transpired a couple of hours ago, in painful and angering detail. It made his blood boil to the point where he thought he might explode, knowing what Neil had done to Max and Susan.

"I wish I could fucking kill that fucking piece of shit," he seethed, getting up from the couch to pace back and forth on the carpet floor. "How on Earth could God have created someone like him?"

"Fuck if I know," Max said. At this point, she was past tears of frustration. All she could feel was a deep pit of hatred for just a singular person burrowing itself into her insides like a parasite. "Can we talk about something else? I need to get my mind off this."

"Okay, sure," Lucas replied, feeling bad that he had let his temper get away for him for a moment. He stopped his pacing to look at her. "What do you wanna do?"

"Just...come here and lay with me," she responded, stretching her arms out a little bit like some kind of baby animal toward its mother.

"Okay."

11. Chapter 11

Hey guys! I'd just like to take a second to thank you guys for your follows and favorite and reviews, I really appreciate them. I'm going to start replying to the reviews. The more feedback I get, the more motivated I am to write, so all the support is appreciated. I have no plans to stop any time soon, and I have plans working for many chapters in the future. Just let me know what you guys think, I love hearing your opinions and criticisms.

I only got one review last chapter:

Bruh: Don't worry, I plan to shift focus really soon. I really liked this Max / Lucas storyline, but in the coming chapters there's gonna be a lot of Mileven. That's what most people like :)

It was July 9th in Hawkins, eleven o'clock in the evening. Max was currently spending the night with Lucas, unknowing to Lucas's parents, or hers. Jonathan and Nancy were together in Jonathan's room, getting down to business. Will was sleeping, after tossing and turning for a long time, thinking about the possibility of Hopper being alive. He was still questioning Mike's decision.

Joyce was sitting in the living room, drinking alone. She had tried to exchange some words with her sons, but with no success. So she had let them go and told herself that she would try to talk to them in the morning when they all had clear heads.

And El was sitting on the couch, alone, in Mike's basement. She was going to be spending the night alone; Mike's parents were growing suspicious about Mike sleeping in the basement all the time. So he had told El that for just this night, he was going to sleep in his own bedroom, upstairs. And for once, El was okay with that; that meant she finally had a chance to read through the magazines that Max had given to her.

So she had settled down, the stack of magazines beside her on the right, a bag of chips on the left. And on the table near the couch was a small reading light illuminated the room in a warm, majestic glow.

She turned the first page of the first magazine. And taking a deep breath, she began to read.

Susan was sitting in the armchair in the living room of her house. Neil was in the bedroom. And there was no way in hell that she was going to sleep with him tonight; not after what had happened. It was late, and her mind was still whirling, not knowing what to do.

Her daughter had run away. Her husband was in their bedroom, stirring, probably thinking about Billy. Neil had struck her own daughter, and he probably would have been hit too, *if* she had said something.

She had to admit that although he was her stepson, Susan was not entirely broken about the loss. A connection had never formed between them; to Susan, Billy always felt like a stranger to her in the household. But obviously, even though it seemed to her like he just served as a means for Neil to let his temper out, Billy had meant more to him than met the eye. Or at least that was what she was lead to assume. And this whole situation was tearing her family apart mercilessly.

And she didn't know how to stop it.

The following morning, Joyce awoke with a goal in her mind. A goal that she would not shy away from, and a goal that she was determined to complete before the end of the day. She was going to have a proper discussion with both her sons about the idea of moving, and she was going to do it well; she was going to convince them that this was the best thing that she could do for them, herself, and the family as a whole, even for El.

She dragged herself out from under the sheets and shuffled to the kitchen to make some breakfast. She figured she would make something nice for Jonathan and Will, and maybe put them in a better mood before she tried to talk to them. She was shocked when she came out of the hallway and saw both of them seated at the dining table, with bowls of cereal in front of them. They were both looking at Joyce.

"Uh..." Joyce started. She did not expect this. "Good morning, guys.

How'd you sleep?"

Jonathan was poker-faced. "Not well."

"Oh, that's too bad, sweetie," Joyce tried to console him. "Is something on your mind?"

Jonathan laughed dryly. Will was still emotionless. "Yeah, Mom. Yeah, you could say that."

Shit. Joyce clenched her eyes shut, knowing that she not have asked if something was wrong. Of course, there was something wrong, for fuck's sake. "Okay, yes, but... did anything else happen since...since yesterday?"

"Have a seat, Mom," instructed Jonathan, motioning toward the third chair at the table. "Will and I have some stuff we want to say to you."

Without speaking, Joyce slowly and cautiously moved to the seat and sat down. She was about to make a move to grab some cereal, but realized that she wasn't feeling all that hungry; quite the opposite, actually. So she folded her hands in front of her and looked at her two sons, eager and nervous to hear what they had to say.

"Will and I think that moving is not in the best interest of anyone in this family, including you," Jonathan started. "For starters, I'm going into my senior year of high school, and that is something I'd really like to do in my hometown, with Nancy."

"And I'm going into high school next year," Will spoke for the first time that morning. "That's something I'd really like to do with my friends, and with Jonathan, at least just for the ninth grade."

"I think it would be best for Will to go through high school here, in Hawkins. With the people who know what he's been through, what we've all been through. What if something happens, and the only people we can talk to about it are ten hours away?"

"But you guys don't even know where we're moving yet," Joyce countered.

"You told me it was far," Jonathan shot back. "What qualifies as 'far'?"

to you, Mom?"

Joyce pondered the question. "I was hoping to stay within a five hours driving distance, at least."

"Five hours? Are you hearing yourself, Mom?" Jonathan's voice was rising. He was becoming more and angrier; not for his situation, but more El and Will. There was no way he was going to put them through this. No way.

"What if something happens with El? What if something happens in Hawkins, and El is five hours away? What are we gonna do?"

"Nothing is going to happen, sweetie, the gate was closed, and-"

"That's what we said six months ago, and look where we are now."

Joyce cringed at the statement. She did not need to be reminded of what had happened five nights ago. "I know, but El's powers are gone, and she isn't any more help then Mike or Lucas or-"

"She's more of a help here then she is in fucking tin-buck-two with us!" Jonathan yelled.

"Jonathan, calm down-"

"This is insane, Mom! Do you have an idea how-"

"Jonathan!" Will said loudly. It was not a yell; just a loud voice. Jonathan's voice immediately ceased. "You need to calm down. We wanted to talk to Mom, not just yell at her."

Jonathan looked embarrassed. "Okay, yeah... yeah, sorry." He licked his lips and eased back into his chair, which he had at some point stood up from.

"Mom, all we're saying is, for us, and especially El...*especially*-" he enunciated that word strongly. "-El, we think that it's... it's best that we stay here. At least until we're out of high school."

"That's four years from now, Will. Maybe, even more, depending on when we move," Joyce pointed out.

"What's so wrong about that?" her younger son replied. "Why can't we stay here for four more years? What's the rush?"

Joyce massaged her temples. Her patience and motivation to hold this conversation was dwindling. "Guys," she said, still holding her fingers to the side of her head. "I...cannot live in this town anymore. Silence. She continued. "This house is falling apart, and with El moving in, we'd literally have nowhere to put her."

"Me and Jonathan could share a room," Will suggested. Jonathan nodded his head, although he knew that he would be kissing any sleeping with Nancy in their house away. But for this cause, it was worth it.

"Will, Jonathan is almost eighteen, he needs his own room to sleep in. And your rooms aren't big enough for two people. On top of that, I'm probably gonna lose my job soon. We're almost the only store left in downtown, and every day we are having a new sale. What happens when I get laid off?"

Jonathan and Will were quiet. They knew she was right about this. "I can't provide for three kids on the money I'm making right now, let alone if I downright lose the job."

"I can help. I've been helping since I was fifteen, Mom," Jonathan said. He was grasping at straws now, and he could tell his Mom knew her was too.

"Jonathan, you need to be focusing on school. You're going to college next year. You can't be working overtime every night to uphold a responsibility that isn't yours."

They seemed to have reached an impasse. Every point that they had made so far had been logically countered by Joyce. "But Mom," Will said quietly. "What about El?"

Joyce's eyes betrayed her feelings toward this. Pity, anguish and hurt spread across her face. "I know that this is going to be hard for her, but-

"Mom, it's going to destroy her."

Joyce felt herself starting to tear up, especially when she saw Will doing the same. "Do you think this is what Hopper would want for...for his daughter? For us to drag her away from the only family she ever had? From me and Dustin and Lucas? From Max? From *Mike*?"

"I know it's hard to accept, but..." Joyce paused. "I think that if Hopper is watching over me right now, I think he would want El to grow up in a place where she can have support from as many people as possible, in as safe a place as possible. Hawkins... I don't think that Hawkins is safe anymore."

"So we're just going to leave the others?"

"We'll be within driving distance, like I said," Joyce said sharply.

Jonathan and Will eyed their Mom. "I'm done with this conversation," she said. She needed to place her foot down here, and she knew it. "We can come here once a month if you like. They can come to our new house for a few nights. They can stay the entire Thanksgiving weekend with us, if they are allowed. But I am still your mother, and as your mother, I am in charge of your lives. And what I think is the best thing for us to do is to move to a new house to a new town, get a fresh start, and try to heal. This is for all of us."

She stood up. "Do I make myself clear?" Her tone was gentle and nice, yet firm. Joyce was an expert at using that tone. Will nodded.

"Yes," Jonathan replied, meeting her eyes.

"Good," she said. "In the meantime, I want to invite El to live with us. I want you boys to go the Wheeler's house today, and talk to both of them."

Mike walked down the stairs of his basement and saw El on the couch, reading a book. He couldn't tell exactly what she was reading. As he came closer, he realized that it was a magazine. "What are you reading?"

El jumped out of her sitting position on the couch. "Oh, my God," she gasped. "Mike, you scared me!"

"Oh, shit, sorry, El. I didn't mean to, I just came down the stairs and-"

"No, it's okay Mike, don't worry. I'm... I'm fine. I was just reading..." her eyes flitted to the floor. "I was reading some magazines that Max lent me."

"Oh, cool," he said, already losing interest. He figured they were probably some girly things with makeup and stuff like that.

His attention turned to something else in the room, but El didn't see nor care what it was. She took advantage of the opportunity and snatched up all the cosmo magazines and put them back in the bag, which she threw under a blanket in the corner of the room.

"How'd you sleep?" El asked.

Mike's attention returned to El. "Eh...not so great."

El's face became concerned. "Why?"

"I wasn't down here with you," he said with a smile. El grinned and moved toward him. She stood up on her tippy toes and pecked him on the lips, then hugged him.

"Thank you for letting me stay here for so long," she said, her face buried into his shoulder.

"It hasn't been that long," Mike said, rolling his eyes.

"It's been five nights, Mike."

Mike pulled out of the hug but kept his hands on her shoulders. "Really? That many?"

"Yes," she replied, with a light laugh. "I counted."

"Wow," he said. "It hasn't... it hasn't felt like that long."

"Mm-hm," El murmured, settling back into the hug, which Mike returned. They stayed like that in the middle of the room, wrapped in a tight embrace that neither wanted to break.

El's mind drifted to an article she had read in one of the magazines. She had read only read one of them and half of another, but she had already gained a decent amount of knowledge, at least she hoped so. She wasn't sure how much there was to learn. There were a lot of magazines... she had no idea that this sex stuff was so in depth.

A lot of the things she had read in it seemed slightly... strange. She didn't dislike the idea of doing anything that she read, but she just felt that she wasn't quite ready. And she was afraid of what Mike would do if she did something that he didn't like.

But she had read some stuff about kissing, which was something that they already did regularly. So she was eager to try to apply some of her newfound knowledge. She shuffled her feet so that Mike's back was to the couch, and she moved forward suddenly and pushed him over onto the couch.

Mike was surprised, but pleasantly so. "El, what are you-"

Before Mike could finish the question, El had closed the gap between them and had gently moved his body to a lying position. Mike stopped talking, and now was anticipating what was coming next. Now that he was lying on his back lengthwise across the couch, El lay on top of him, so that he was bearing her full weight on his body.

And she moved her mouth to his, and then they were kissing. Dopamine exploded through El's brain, the feeling of being so close to the boy she loved putting her in a sort of trance. She tangled one hand his hair and she rested the other on his chest. She moved her head ever so slightly in a sort of up and down motion, increasing the friction and sensation of her lips on his. It was amazing.

She opened her mouth ever so slightly and grabbed Mike's bottom lip in hers and gently sucked and nibbled it, and when Mike gave a sigh into her mouth, she knew she was on the right track. She felt Mike's lips part slightly as well, and his tongue drew a gentle line across her lips, asking for permission to enter.

Eager to comply, El let her tongue slide out and they met in the middle, and a flurry of sparks seemed to radiate from the where they touched and flew through both their bodies. She pulled her head

away from Mike's face and moved her attention toward his neck. She remembered reading about it, and she remembered when Mike did it to her, and it had felt so good. She wanted to return the favor.

She latched her lips onto the skin and tangled both her hands into his mound of hair. Running her fingers through it she continued to apply a light and loving suction on the skin, mixed with gentle strokes of her tongue. Mike let out a faint grunt of pleasure and started to run his hands up and down El's back.

"Jesus, El..." he breathed. El smiled and shifted her focus to another place on his neck closer to his jawline. He suddenly felt one of Mike's large hands find a resting point on her ass. As soon as his hands touched it, faint chills ran up her body. She moaned at the sensation, but did not break away from Mike's skin.

Realizing that El was enjoying what he was doing, he gave a light squeeze. "Yes, Mike..."

He could feel his confidence growing, and wanted to make a bolder move. The testosterone was impairing his judgement, for better or for worse. He was about to slide his fingers under the waistband of her pants, but the moment was ruined when his Mom yelled down the stairs at him. "MIKE!"

El sat up, still straddling Mike's hips. "WHAT?" Mike called back up the stairs.

"WILL IS HERE!" Mike was incredulous. What was Will doing here? And by himself? He had never told him that he was coming... that meant something was probably wrong.

"Okay, let's see what he wants," Mike grumbled. He knew that he had promised Will that he would be fairer toward his other friends and not prioritize El so much over them, but he was incredibly pissed off that they had been interrupted. Who knows where they would have gone if her Mom's shriek hadn't broken them up. "Stay down here, my Mom is still upstairs."

El nodded, and Mike made his way up the creaky wooden stairs. He turned toward the door, and saw Will standing just inside the

doorway. "Hey, Will, what's up?"

Will was quiet for a second as if processing what he had asked. "My, uh... my Mom

wants you and El to come back to our house with us," he said. "She wants to talk to you guys about... something."

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No, no," Will said. The family had collectively determined that they were not going to tell El that they were

moving out of Hawkins; that would be a bridge to cross later. Right now the only concern was getting El to come live with them. Not that they thought it would be difficult. Everyone involved knew that El couldn't live in Mike's basement for the rest of her life.

"So nothing is wrong?" Mike said, still a little bit concerned.

"No, nothing is wrong. Can you just get El and we'll meet you guys around back? My

brother is waiting in the car."

"Okay."

Thanks for reading guys! Review please, I'll try to get the next one out as soon as I can, but the more reviews the quicker it'll come. And drop a follow if you're enjoying, this story is not stopping any time soon.

12. Chapter 12

Hey guys! I'd like to thank everyone who left reviews last chapter, your kinds words are much appreciated. I got this chapter out as quick as I could, and it's entirely Mike and El, so I hope you'll like that. In the meantime, make sure to let me know what you think, the more feedback I get the harder I'll try to get the next chapter out. I already have it planned out.

Ang: I hope you'll like this chapter, then :)

Harley Grove: We have to get some of Will cock-blocking Mike, don't we? haha

El Henderson: Thanks for the compliments! I'm glad you enjoy Lumax too.

grievesforyou: Thank you so much, it means a lot!

Jonathan drove up the driveway toward his house, his brother in the passenger seat beside him. In the backseat sat Mike and El. He noticed that they were holding hands, and they had been since they stepped in the car. He internally sighed, knowing that in due time, they were going to have to tell her that they were leaving from Hawkins, and taking her with them.

"Alright, guys, we're here," he announced, opening the car door and stepping out. The rest of the gang hopped out of the vehicle after him and walked toward the front door. Jonathan opened it without knocking and held the door open for them as they walked into the living room. Their shoes were kicked off and thrown by the door carelessly, in typical teenage fashion.

Joyce greeted them when she walked around the corner. "Hey guys."

"Hi, Mrs. Byers," Mike replied politely. El gave a shy wave and smile, not quite meeting her eyes.

"Hi, El," Joyce said, approaching her slowly. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess," she said quietly. "Mike helps me."

"I know he does," Joyce replied, smiling at Mike for a brief moment. "Anyway, there's something that I'd like to talk to you guys about. It's really important."

Mike instantly felt a little bit nervous. Joyce probably wanted to talk to them about their current "living arrangements." While he understood that it was not possible for El to live in his basement for the rest of her life, he still was upset that the time for it was coming to an end. He had loved every second of living with her, even the times when she was crying or mad or sad or whatever. He just wanted to be with her. Regardless, he sincerely hoped that whatever Joyce had planned, that it would make El happy.

They all walked to the living area and sat down. Everyone was looking at El, and it was making her slightly uncomfortable. Shifting a little bit in her sitting position, she reached across the couch she was sitting on and grabbed Mike's hand and squeezed it. He squeezed back.

"So, El," Joyce began. "We know that you've been living with Mike for the past few nights."

El nodded. "Yes."

"And how has that been?"

El glanced over at Mike, and then back at Joyce. "It's been good."

Joyce pursed her lips and folded her hands together. "Well, the thing is... you can't live with Mike forever. We have to think about school, and Mike's parents and living situation, and the future for all of us."

El was quiet, still holding her gaze at Joyce. "How would you like living with me and the boys?"

Mike was expecting this question to come up. He knew that it was just a matter of time before Joyce made this gesture. What else would she have done? He knew that there was a place in her heart for El, a place that was made the day she stepped into that kiddie pool and found Will. And now Joyce had the chance to finally give something back to her; a new home. As soon as he found out that Hopper had

died he knew that the person next in line to take care of her was Joyce.

"You want me to come live with you and... and Will and Jonathan?"

"Yes, we do," Joyce replied confidently. "Right, guys?"

Will and Jonathan both nodded, but something was wrong. Yes, something seemed off about them, for sure... like they knew something that they didn't. Was Joyce hiding something? And did Will and Jonathan know about it? "Does she even have an alternative?" Mike asked. It wasn't fair for El to not know what all of her choices were.

Joyce was caught off guard, not expecting Mike to be the one to suggest an alternative. This was El's best option by far. "Well... I guess if El really wanted to, we could send her to her Aunt's," she suggested. "Other than that, foster care is really the only alternative, but I don't think I'd let that happen."

"Okay," Mike said. "El, what do you think?"

El thought about the question. She loved the idea of living with Mike, but she understood what Joyce was saying; thinking in terms of the big picture, living in a basement just wasn't in the cards. She and Hopper had been talking about school, and she had been studying for the past six months with Hopper's cabin with his help. The plan was to enroll in school with the rest of the Party when they started grade nine in September. She also knew that having *Mike's* parents as *her* parents would not be a good idea at all, for a lot of reasons.

"Yes, I would like that," El smiled, looking around the room at everyone. "Thank you."

Joyce smiled and clapped her hands together. "Awesome. We've already figured out

the living arrangements. Jonathan and Will were going to share Will's room, and maybe you could take Jonathan's old room?"

El nodded. The idea of having a larger room than the one in the cabin was appealing to her. A larger bed, larger closet for more

clothes (which she had recently taken a liking to, thanks to Max), more space for her things. "Yes please, thank you," she said gratefully.

"We can start moving things from the cabin into the new room tomorrow if you guys want," she suggested. "It will probably have to be a group effort."

"I'm okay with that, I have nothing else to do," Mike said. "And we can have the rest of the party come over as well, and they'd definitely help too."

El smiled, already looking forward to the move. And living with the Byers really excited her; it would never replace Hopper, but having a real family to live with sounded promising.

"Maybe El and I can go over there and sort through some things? So we don't have to waste time tomorrow?" Mike piped up. He was really eager to spend as much time as possible with El before the relocated from his house.

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea," Joyce smiled at him. "What do you think, El?"

El nodded shyly. Despite the fact that she had returned to the group over half a year ago, she had yet to really develop any *real* relationship with Joyce. Even with Will she had not really quite connected with yet; Will was nearly as shy and quiet as she was, even with the rest of the party. Maybe that would change in the future. But right now, having a full conversation with Joyce was making her feel slightly uncomfortable. But she knew Joyce well enough and was confident that she would do a great job taking care of her.

"Okay," Mike said. "Me and El can bike there from my house."

"Are you sure? We can give you a ride," Jonathan offered.

Mike looked to El. "Do you want to get a ride?" he asked, to which El gently shook her

head.

"Okay, we'll head out then. Thanks, Mrs. Byers," Mike got up from his

seat and started to walk in the door. El followed.

"Wait, hold on," Joyce stood up and took a step toward them, holding a hand up. "When you guys are done, bring El back here. She can sleep in my bed, I'll take the couch."

Mike was about to object, wanting to spend just *one* more night with the girl he loved, but El beat him to the chase. "Is it okay if I sleep with Mike for one more night?" she questioned timidly, barely meeting Joyce's eyes.

Joyce opened her mouth but didn't speak. She closed it and exhaled. Mike felt a little bit awkward, kind of cringing at El's choice of words. She made it sound like they were having sex or something, and that definitely was NOT what they were doing. And Mike did not want El's new "mother" to get the wrong idea before she even officially adopted her. He needed to make that idea evidently clear for Joyce.

"We aren't actually... like... *sleeping*, sleeping together, just sleeping. Not sleeping, but, uh-" Mike stuttered.

"Yes, we are sleeping together. On the couch," El said, clearly not understanding the euphemism. Mike turned to Joyce with pleading eyes, begging her to understand that they weren't actually having sex yet, and she seemed to understand.

"Okay, fine, one more night," she caved. "But just remember that you better be careful

with Mike's parents. If you guys hadn't already been staying there for five nights, I wouldn't allow this."

El beamed, and it was the first time Joyce had seen El genuinely smile since Starcourt. She had a beautiful smile, and she found it contagious because then she was smiling too. "Alright, you two. Take care."

"Thanks, Mrs. Byers," Mike said, and El waved goodbye and they stepped out the door, closing it behind them.

They had been walking in comfortable silence for about twenty minutes. They were coming close to the cabin where El's old home

was, and Mike was feeling very apprehensive about it.

He wanted to come here to help El sort through her things, so she could decide what she wanted to bring back with her to Joyce's house. But he was worried that going into the cabin would be hard for her; she had endured in a lot of trauma that night; they all had. And the last thing that El needed was to get some kind of panic attack at just the sight of the cabin. And with each passing moment, as they drew closer to the old wooden house, he found himself getting more and more anxious for El. What if something happened? A panic attack or something? Was this a good idea?

"How are you feeling?" he asked her, sneaking a glance in her direction.

El hesitated for a few moments. "Okay, I guess," she replied. "Kind of... nervous."

"Why are you nervous?"

"I don't know," she said, confusion written on her face. "What if there is something there?"

"In the cabin?"

"Yes."

"There's nothing in there, El," Mike assured her. He stopped walking and grabbed her hand. "The gate was closed, so that means everything is gone. But if you don't want to come here, we don't have to."

El searched her boyfriend's face and found that as she looked at it, she grew less afraid of going into the cabin. If Mike was with her, it would be okay. She'd be okay.

"No, it's fine. I want to go," she said, nodding her head confidently. "I just want you to be with me."

"I'll be with you the whole time, El," he responded and pulled her in to hug her. El clung onto him as well, her hands rubbing his shoulder blades. His scent comforted her in a way nothing else did. She closed

her eyes and sighed deeply.

They parted and continued on the walk, and soon the cabin came into view. El inhaled sharply. "Are you sure about this?" she heard Mike ask for the second time. She smiled, finding his concern for her cute and endearing. After giving a curt nod of her head in reply, she kept going. She heard Mike's footsteps behind her, and knowing that he was following, she kept walking on, head held high.

Before she knew it, she was standing on the rickety porch of the old house. The door was already part of the way open; thank goodness for that, because if it had been locked she would not have been able to use her powers to open it. She put her hand on the door handle and pushed, stepping inside.

Her heart skipped a beat when she looked around. Seeing her home like this was... heartbreaking. The wooden flooring and rugs that had been set down when they moved were covered in bloodstains; from who, she did not know, but she assumed most of it was from her. There was a gaping hole in the ceiling, below which were several splinters of wood and debris that had fallen on the floor. In the walls, there were two more smaller holes that had been bashed in by the Mindflyer's tentacles. The pots and pans and silverware in the kitchen was almost entirely knocked on the floor and shattered. It looked like a bomb had gone off right in the middle of the living room, and it had completely blown up the location where the only good part of her life had taken place.

El felt her emotions start to take over as she walked deeper into the cabin, whilst still processing all the damage that had been done. And with each new detail she took in, each crack in the wall, each shattered window, each broken item, she felt another fissure open up in her heart.

And then suddenly she felt a pair of arms wrap around her waist from behind her. Upon realizing they were Mike's she leaned her back up against him and took a shaky breath in and squeezed her eyes shut. "Do you want to leave?" Mike asked softly in her ear.

She shook her head. "No, I want to see my room."

She unwillingly eased herself out of Mike's embrace and padded her way through the middle of the room and toward the door of her bedroom. This door was closed, but not locked. She put her hand on the doorknob, but could not bring herself to open it.

"We'll go in together, okay?" Mike told her. He grabbed her other hand with his and placed his other hand on the doorknob over hers. "Ready?"

"Ready."

And they turned the doorknob simultaneously and stepped into the room. El breathed a

deep sigh of relief. Despite the condition of the living room, her room remained almost completely unscathed. All of her drawings and photos and books and music and radio were still there, calling to her. Her limited collection of clothes that had recently expanded was hanging in the open closet in the corner. Her bed was messy and the sheets were thrown about. And all of it put together gave her an overwhelming sense of comfort. A sense of home. But she knew beyond the door she had just walked through, things were much different. But for now, she was in her room. Looking at it made her happy. Her eyes fell on the photos on the shelf in front of her.

A smile broke out across her face and she felt tears start to form. She couldn't actually tell if they were tears of sadness from her home being destroyed or tears of joy from the fact that all of her personal belongings had somehow been preserved. Perhaps it was a combination of both.

"El, is everything okay?" Mike asked when he saw her start to cry. She turned around and hugged him tightly, standing on her tiptoes so she could wrap her arms around his neck.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'm happy that all of my things are still here."

Mike grinned deeply. It brought him so much pleasure to know that for the first time in nearly a week, the girl he loved seemed to be genuinely happy. "I'm happy about that too," he murmured, absentmindedly stroking his fingers through her beautiful hair.

"Although, I wouldn't have been so upset if that picture of me in the Ghostbusters costume was broken."

"Hey!" El gasped, pulling out of the hug immediately. "That's my second favorite photo of you!"

"Yeah, well, it's my *least* favorite photo of me," he said laughing. She laughed back at him and went to grab the frame.

"How can you not like it?" she asked incredulously. "Look how cute you were."

Mike faked vomiting. "I look stupid. God, I remember being the only person in school to dress up that Halloween."

"Really? You never told me that," El said.

"Yeah, probably 'cause I was too embarrassed. It was awful."

El smiled playfully, and walked along the rest of her dresser, dragging her fingertips along

the edge of the wooden piece of furniture. She admired the other items on the shelf. Her eyes fell on a photo of the two of them at the snowball, which had been taken by Jonathan. It was beautiful; she was all done up in her makeup and her curly hair had been styled, and she was wearing that beautiful dress. And Mike looked so handsome in that suit, with his hair combed, and he had smelled so good that night.

"This is my first favorite photo, by the way," she said quietly, almost only to herself. Mike walked beside her and eyed the photo.

"Nah, I think *this* is my favorite one," he said, holding back laughter. He pointed to a piece of paper taped on the wall that was a drawing of him, done by El.

El squealed in embarrassment. "Oh, my God, why do I still have that up?" she cried, covering her eyes with her hands, but she could not hide the smile tugging at her lips.

"You have it up because I like it," Mike replied. "But I'm kidding."

"That's my favorite photo of you, too."

"Photo of *us*," she corrected.

"Yeah, photo of us."

They stood beside each other, admiring the framed photograph for a long amount of time. Mike reached over and plucked the mixtape off the desk. "Do you remember when I gave you this?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied. "Valentine's Day."

"I asked Jonathan to help me make it," he said. "I had never really talked to Jonathan one on one before. I wish I had an older brother like him."

"What about Nancy?"

"Eh," Mike scrunched his face. "I love Nancy, you know, but... I still think it would be cooler to have an older *brother*."

Eh nodded, and took the mix-tape from Mike's hand. "What are you doing?" he asked with a chuckle.

"You'll see," she replied teasingly. She popped open her radio and put the tape in. Her finger pressed the play button, and after a few seconds, the first song started to play out through the room. *Never Surrender* by Corey Hart.

"I heard this song on the car radio, and I immediately thought of you," Mike explained. He would never tell his friends, but ever since he had El back in his life he found that he really liked this "lovey-dovey" music, as he called it. It made him think of El, and he had decided to put all of his favorite ones together in a mix-tape and give it to her. Turns out, it had been a really good idea.

El sat down on her bed, where the sheets were still rustled and in a mess. "Come here," she instructed.

"Yes, ma'am," Mike replied and did a mock salute. She laughed. Mike's humor, although sometimes strange and a little bit awkward, never failed to amuse her. He took a single step before El got up

herself and met him halfway, and tilted her head upward and pulled his head down to hers.

In a moment of pure bliss for both of them, their lips met. Then separated, and quickly met again, repeatedly exchanging quick pecks, and each one grew longer and more passionate until they reached a point where they were no longer separating, but were rather locked together in a passionate bond.

El's hands found Mike's shoulders and pulled him down with her as she lay down in bed, her head connecting with the pillow. Being careful not to crush her, he laid onto his girlfriend, placing some of his weight on his knees and right elbow that was placed just beside her. But El had other ideas, and set her palms flat on his upper back and pulled him in closer so that no part of her body was not being touched by his.

The feeling of being so close to her made Mike's mind foggy, and he started to feel the sensation of arousal growing in his crotch. He was about to pull away, not wanting to confuse or hurt El, but he was pleasantly shocked when El curled her fingers into his hair and started to gently move her hips upward to meet his lower body. Then she lowered them. Then raised them. Lowered them. Raised. Lowered.

The repetition of the movement drove him crazy, and soon he found himself meeting her, their lower bodies connecting over and over again, and with each connection, endorphins exploded from his head and into the rest of his body. He was actually doing this. He was full-on grinding her, and he was loving it.

Meanwhile, El felt like she was in true heaven. To be in this moment with Mike, being so intimate with him without having to worry about being interrupted was something that she only dreamed about. And being here, now, experiencing this with him for the first time was nothing short of glorious.

Her thoughts went to one of the magazines she had read about some of the things people could do together. She had been eager to try some of those things, but now that she found herself in the moment, and despite her mind being clouded by her hormones, she still found

herself second-guessing herself. What if she did something wrong? What if Mike didn't like something? What if she didn't like something? She also remembered reading that most of these things were to be done at an older age, and she was still only fourteen. Perhaps those things were better to wait for.

But that didn't mean she couldn't just have a great make-out session with her boyfriend.

She rolled over so that she was now on top of him, and she attacked his neck. She sucked and licked the skin lovingly and thoroughly. All while continuing to rhythmically drive her hips into his over and over again. The moans escaping Mike's lips drove her on, as she slowly moved her lips along his neck, going from the right side, then to the middle under his chin, and his left side.

Her mouth went back onto Mike's, whose lips had parted and allowed her tongue access into his mouth. His tongue snaked out and met hers, and they danced together as one. After a few more minutes, El rolled onto the bed beside Mike, and stared at the ceiling,

"That was nice," she said, almost giddy from what had just transpired.

"Yeah, it was," Mike replied, equally stunned.

El cuddled up beside him, resting her head on his chest, and he placed his arm around

her shoulders. And to the sound of the music playing in the background softly, they lay there together for the rest of the day.

13. Chapter 13

Welcome back everyone! Sorry about the wait for this chapter, I hope you guys like it. Next chapter is going to be Mileven centered, so stay tuned for that. In the meantime, enjoy chapter 13, and thank you all so much for your reviews and support!

39ClueStrangerThingsFan-Star: It is a good song, I enjoy it a lot!

Harley Grove: It's all we ever wanted, haha

Stranger Records: Thank you! I hope you enjoy this one too!

Bruh: It will be a hard chapter to write... I plan on doing it later though, toward the end of the summer. I will get to though. At some point XD

Max awoke slowly in a confused daze. She looked around, not knowing where she was for a fraction of a second, and then remembered that she was once again not in her house, but in Lucas's. She recalled the reason that she was here in the first place; her stepdad.

Her face contorted at the thought of him. She realized that her Mom was alone with him at the moment, and she felt a pang of guilt for leaving her there alone, and considered going back. But her fear and hatred of Neil got the better of her and she decided that for now, it was best to stay here.

She glanced to her left, where she saw Lucas sleeping beside her, on the air mattress that he had blown up last night. His eyes were closed and his mouth was gaping open, and he snored quietly. A grin tugged at her lips, despite the situation she was in with her parents. It brought her comfort to know that, whatever happened, Lucas would be there for her the whole time. *I don't deserve him at all*, she thought.

As subtly and quietly as possible, she got out from under the sheets and went to the bathroom. When she came back out after she was done, she saw that Lucas was now awake, and he was lying in bed with his hands folded behind his head, his elbows out.

"Morning, Stalker," she greeted him.

Lucas yawned. "Hi," he replied. "Sleep well?"

"Good enough."

"How does your cheek feel?"

Max brushed her fingers along the cut on her face, vividly remembering Neil's hand connecting with her face in that spot. "It's feeling better. Still stings when I touch it, though."

"Maybe you'll get a scar. That would be pretty cool," Lucas smiled.

"Ew, no," she said, disgusted by the notion. "What's with boys and scars? Face scars are even more terrible."

"Scars are bad-ass. Ask anyone," Lucas said matter-of-factly.

"Uh-huh," she sighed in exasperation. *Boys.*

"So what's the plan for today?" Lucas questioned.

"I don't even know," Max said. Her mind was still flooded with what had happened with her parents, and Billy; everything seemed like a blur. The only thing holding her together and keeping life somewhat in focus was her boyfriend.

At times when she was feeling upset, she found that she was past the point of crying; she had done that so much lately. But she felt like she had somehow reached her limit like she was just empty. Whether that was good or bad, she did not know. Every time she thought of Billy, she almost felt like crying but never did. It was confusing and upsetting.

But perhaps she was just moving along with the grieving process. There is only so many tears one person can shed.

"Maybe we can hang out with the rest of the party today?" she suggested.

"That sounds like a good idea, actually."

"Come in, Mike," the Super Com crackled to life and El's eyes shot open. They were in Mike's basement. They had considered spending the night in the cabin, but they didn't want to chance it; they were in a dingy house in the middle of the woods with holes in the walls. It was supposed to have been pretty cool that night, so they had decided to go back to Mike's house for the night. They had pleasant sleep on the pull-out, and now, it appeared that someone was trying to get in contact with her boyfriend.

"Come in, Mike," the Super Com repeated again. El reached out her hand to use her powers to draw it toward her, but then remembered that her powers were gone. She cursed to herself and heaved herself out of the makeshift bed.

She recognized that voice to be Lucas's, so when she spoke into the Super Com she addressed him appropriately. "Lucas, it's El. Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm good. Are you with Mike?"

She looked over at his peaceful and sleeping figure. "Yes, he's here. He's sleeping, though."

"Oh, shit, did I wake you up?"

El flicked her eyes to the clock and read that it was nearly eleven. It was late enough, and she did not want to make Lucas feel bad. "No, I was already awake. I was going to get Mike up soon anyway."

"Do you guys want to meet up at my house? Everyone else is coming, too."

El smiled at the idea. "Yes, I'll get Mike."

"Alright, cool, I'll see you guys soon, then."

"Bye, Lucas."

She let go of the button on the Super Com and placed it on the couch behind her. Finding herself in a very good mood that morning, she practically skipped over to her sleeping boyfriend, and woke him up by peppering light kisses all over his face. "Wake up, Mike."

Mike groaned. "What time izit?" he muttered, rolling over in bed.

"Eleven o'clock. Lucas called," she replied.

"Whadid Lucassay?" he slurred, still groggy from his sleep.

"He wants to hang out today, with the rest of the Party. At his house."

"Aren you goin' tuh Will's houze?"

"That's later. We probably aren't going to be moving my things in there until tomorrow, I'm just sleeping there tonight, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," he remembered. "And we goin' to Lucas's houze today?"

"Just wake up," she said exasperatedly, but while laughing. "Or you won't get a single kiss from me today."

Mike shot up after hearing this. "I'm awake, I'm awake," he said loudly. "There, you see?"

"Mm-hm," El smirked, and walked to the bathroom. Mike saw his girlfriend walking away from him, and paused his mind just to admire her for a few brief moments. He was stunned over the fact that since six months ago after seeing her for the first time in a year, she had changed and matured so much. And in that time he could see that she was slowly blossoming into a young, beautiful woman. Her curves were much more pronounced, and her body had grown in all the right places; her ass, her breasts, her beautiful hair; she was absolutely stunning.

Shaking his head and trying to calm his hormones, he let her use the bathroom in peace and went upstairs for a shower.

After saying goodbye to his Mom and grabbing a quick breakfast for himself (and some extra Eggos for El) Mike had darted downstairs, given El her food, and taken off together through the back basement door to go to Lucas's.

They had decided to walk; it was a nice day and the sun was out, and a cool breeze was drifting across Hawkins that gave just the right temperature to be comfortable in summer clothing. They reached the

driveway of the Sinclair household and saw Will and Dustin coming from down the street across from them.

A smile broke across all of their faces when they saw one another. They met at the foot of the driveway and all exchanged hugs.

"How you feeling, El?" Dustin asked.

El smiled. "I'm good right now."

Will and the rest of them nodded. "Well, let me know if you need anything from me, El," Dustin said, placing his hands on her shoulder and giving it a friendly squeeze.

"Yeah, me too," Will said. "Especially now that we are going to be living together."

Dustin froze with shock and surprise. "What?! When did this happen?"

"Maybe you'd like to find out inside?" Lucas called from the front door that he had just opened. He waved his friends toward him.

They went inside the house and hurried into the basement, saying hello to Mrs. Sinclair on their way. Max was already down there when they reached the bottom of the stairwell.

"Max!" El squealed happily and ran to meet her best friend. She was incredibly thankful for Max being in her life now. It was amazing to have a close friend in her life who was also female; it was always good to know that there would always be someone available to her whenever she needed advice on girl stuff, or just wanted to get away from all the boys in her life; there were so many, even too many it felt, at times.

They finally separated from their hold on one another. "How are you?" Max asked.

"A lot better," she replied, still beaming. "What about you?"

"Same here," Max nodded. "I've been with Lucas, like...every night this week, except for one. It's helped. A lot."

Dustin snickered. "Reallyyyyy...?" he said. "Must have been having some fun, am I right?" he teased.

Max blushed, but Lucas had other ideas. "We've been having more fun than you and *Suzie*. All you guys do is sing," he shot a playful jab back at his friend.

"Ohh, Jesus," Dustin sighed, rubbing his temples. "Please get off my back about tha-" But it was too late.

"Turnnnnn around.... Look at what you seee-eeee-eee..." the entire party was singing now, and Dustin looked like he wanted to kill himself.

"Might I remind you, that song is what saved all of our asses that night," he said loudly over their singing.

"Is what you guys sing when you're having phone sex?" Max teased.

"Fuck you!" Dustin said, but even he couldn't hold back his laughter.

"Wait, what is all this about? I'm so confused," Mike interrupted the conversation.

"Oh, nobody told you and El? Dustin and Suzie decided to sing that song when we were running away from the Mindflayer in our car! It was fucking ridiculous!"

"Are you shitting me? Why would you be singing at a time like that?!" Mike asked incredulously.

"It was because we needed to know what Planck's constant was to unlock the safe. And Suzie was only willing to give it to me if we sang that song."

"Didn't you tell it was serious?!"

"What was I supposed to tell her? 'Yeah, we're just saving the entire world from Russians and monsters from another dimension.' Yeah, that's real convincing."

"Touche."

They all flopped onto the couches in Lucas's basement, and were quiet for a moment.

"Aren't your parents, you know... wondering why you've been gone for so long, then, Max?" Will asked.

"They were on vacation," she replied.

"But didn't they get back on the eighth?"

"The ninth."

"So why did you sleep here last night?"

Max sighed, knowing that it was probably time to tell the rest of her friends about the situation she was in with her parents. "I ran away from home yesterday."

The group was silent for a moment, wide-eyed and incredulous. "Why on Earth would you do that?" Dustin asked, his brow furrowed.

"My house is just... not a very nice place to be in right now, now that my parents are back, and with Billy and all."

"I don't mean to be rude or anything," Mike said, "but does that cut on your cheek have anything to do with that?" Max reached for her cheek, almost covering it up before she realized there really wasn't a fucking point.

"Yeah, that was my Dad," she replied quietly, looking at the floor.

"Are you okay?" El immediately asked, expressing deep concern for her friend. Max nodded in return, but she could tell that Max was hiding the true extent of her feelings. Even El, with her still limited knowledge of social queues, could tell that Max was hurting badly.

"So you're staying here with Lucas?" Mike asked.

"Yeah,"

"That's good," El said. "I've been with Mike, it's amazing."

"Uh-huh," Dustin snickered, along with Will. Their teasing laughter was met with a menacing glare from Mike.

"What are you guys doing today?" asked Will.

"El's moving her things from the cabin into the Byers' later today," Mike replied, to which the rest of the party exclaimed.

"Is El moving in with the Byers'?" Max gasped excitedly.

"Yeah, it looks like it," Will smiled. He hadn't really given it a lot of thought before this point, but the idea of having a sister, (assuming that at some point his Mom would legally adopt her) someone new in the family did kind of excite him. Even though that she would be leaving with them soon, he wanted to make sure that she made the most of her time left in Hawkins. And he was determined to be the best brother possible to her.

"That's great," Lucas said.

"Yeah, except now Mike's girlfriend is his best friend's sister," Dustin howled with laughter and rolled onto his side on the couch.

"Okay, shut up! They're not actual siblings! And you're assuming that Joyce is gonna adopt El!"

"What else would she do? She's a kid, she needs a legal guardian!" Dustin carried on laughing, now on the floor after falling off the couch. "Especially when she starts going to school," he added.

"And they would be step siblings, remember?" Lucas pointed out.

"But they're living in the same house! What if Will walks in on them sucking face or something?!"

"Jesus, Dustin, that's not gonna happen..." Mike muttered, but even he was having a hard time not smiling. Agree with Dustin or not, he was always going to be the funniest one in the Party. Even El was giggling a little bit, which was one of Mike's favourite things to see. Once he had finally calmed down, he turned to face Mike.

"Sorry, what were you saying? Before I pointed out that you're dating

your best friend's *step* sister?"

"El and I are moving her stuff into the Byers' later today," Mike restated, giving a grin to El.

"Can we help you guys?" Max asked. She was desperate to keep herself occupied, she didn't want to be thinking about her situation with her parents at all right now. Plus, it did sound like fun. The whole party together, doing something normal, helping their friend move. Okay, maybe the fact that the house was a trashed mess of broken wood and glass wasn't quite normal, but normal enough for the party.

"Yeah, that sounds cool," Mike said. He knew that time alone with El was amazing, but right now he was feeling like hanging out with all of his friends. "You guys wanna head over there right now?"

The gang had met up with Jonathan and asked him to use his car to move El's stuff back to the Byers'. After enthusiastically agreeing, they had all crammed into the back of the old car and gone over to the old cabin.

As they approached, El already felt the emotions within her stirring again. Even though she had had a nice time with Mike the previous day, it still brought her nearly to tears when she saw her old home in complete tatters. She swallowed the lump in her throat and stepped out of the car. When Mike got out after her, she immediately sought his hand with hers. Their hands latched together, and she instantly felt stronger and warmer; it gave her the courage she needed to go back into her former home.

The Party and Jonathan walked to the front door, in silence. No one knew what to say, really. The last time they had all been in this cabin together had been the fight, where they had nearly died; a traumatic experience for all of them. That was probably the reason that everyone hadn't dared to speak a single word, because of all the thoughts rushing through all of their minds simultaneously.

With the rest of the group in tow, El slowly stepped into the building, and inhaled sharply, and reminded herself that she was with Mike and the rest of her friends and that everything- no matter what- was

going to be okay.

"What should we start moving out, El?" Mike asked her, turning his head toward her so that his deep, brown eyes connected with hers. She slowly turned her head around, surveying the cabin, trying to sort her thoughts in her mind as to what she wanted to take back with her.

"There are some boxes under the floor. I want all of-" she paused. "I want all of the boxes that have to do with Dad. I want the box that says 'Sara,' the box that says 'Vietnam,' and everything else. And I want the box that says 'Hawkins Lab.'"

Everyone nodded, not wanting to question any of the decisions being made. This was El moving out, and they were going to do it her way.

Mike was about to join the others in moving the boxes, but El pulled him aside. Mike gave her a questioning look. "Are there boxes in your room or something?" he asked, and El just grinned to herself and walked toward her bedroom, his hand still clasped in hers.

"No..." she murmured, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Just come."

When they reached her bedroom, El let go of his hand finally. "I just wanted your help with my room," she finally answered. "You're the only one I want to help with this part."

"Oh," Mike said, almost breathlessly. She wanted her help with her bedroom? It didn't really surprise him, he guessed, considering all the personal stuff she had in there, a lot of which that he wouldn't really want his friends seeing. He couldn't have even imagined how much teasing would have resulted in that.

"There's a left-over box we can use," her beautiful voice interrupted his thoughts. "I want to take everything."

"*Everything?*" he repeated dumbfounded. She wanted every single drawing, card, gift, and picture in this entire room to bring back to the Byers'? "Can we at least throw out my Ghostbusters picture?"

"No!" she said, laughing. "I told you, I love that photo." Mike's heart

skipped a beat when he heard that word. *Love*. If he could choose one word to describe his feelings toward this perfect girl that stood before him right now, it would be that word. Had El chosen that word on purpose? Was she dropping a hint? Maybe she loved him too? A part of him was wondering ever since the fourth, if she *had* heard him accidentally admit his feelings toward her, when he was arguing with Max. If she *had* heard him, then she had chosen to ignore it. Why? He did not know.

Shit. He was probably just overthinking this whole thing anyway.

"And I still don't know why," he said, shaking his head but grinning all the same. "I'll be careful with all this stuff."

"Good," she said. "If you break any of it, I'll have to use my powers on y-" she abruptly stopped her sentence.

"What?" Mike asked, chuckling. When he didn't hear his girlfriend finish her sentence, he turned around from where he was crouched by the empty box. Her face had fallen, and there were tears brewing in her eyes.

"Oh my God, El, what happened?" Mike asked, nearly in a panic, practically running across the room to her. As soon as he was within arm's reach, El flung herself forward and buried her body into Mike's tall frame, sobbing into the fabric of his shirt. "What's wrong, El?"

"My p-powers," she stammered through her tears. "I k-keep forgetting that th-th-their gone."

"Shhh, it's okay, I know," he murmured into her ear. "They'll come back, I know it."

"H-how do you kn-know?"

"Because, how could they just go away like that? You've had them your whole life. Maybe they're just... recharging."

"But it's been *days*," she sobbed.

"You used them a lot that day. Maybe it'll take a while," Mike tried to reason with her, but El still had her doubts.

"What of the Mindflayer t-took them?"

"No," Mike suddenly blurted, louder and more abruptly than he would have liked to. Even though he was assuring and comforting El, even *he* had his doubts as to whether her powers would come back. And even though it was true he never liked her just for her powers, it made him nervous, knowing that in some evil dimension out there, some giant monster was trying to kill the girl he loved.

And if he somehow came back, and El didn't have her powers to fight back, well... they would all be one hundred percent screwed.

"He couldn't have taken your powers. There's no way, it can't work like that. It's not that simple, El... those powers, they're a part of you. No one can take them. They'll come back, I promise.

El appreciated all that Mike was doing to help her. She was feeling a little bit better, finding sense in his words. Those powers were a part of her, it was a part of her DNA. They couldn't just be *gone*.

Right?

Thanks for reading! As always, let me know what your thoughts are, what you want to see more of, whatever. I always love to hear what you guys think! Take care 3

14. Chapter 14

Welcome back everyone! Thanks for the support and the new followers on the last chapter, I appreciate all the good feedback! This chapter I focused a lot of Mike and El, with some intimate parts between them, so I hope you guys enjoy it.

Jane Eleanor Wheeler: Thank you! That's what I'm going for. El is in love, but is also in going through a lot of personal struggle right now.

Jean Summerland: Thank you so much! I'm trying to nail the characters as well as I can; a lot of the issues I have with other fics is the characters not being portrayed realistically or in ways that are inconsistent with their on-screen selves. I'm trying to avoid that.

Stranger Records: Thank you! I hope you enjoy this chapter too!

"Is everything okay?"

El nearly jumped out of Mike's arms, started from the voice coming from the doorway. It was Max. Without waiting for an answer, she stepped into the room. "The rest of them are outside loading boxes into the truck," she said. "What's going on?"

Mike bit back the urge to roll his eyes or give her a glare. He still had not quite moved past the fact that she had corrupted El and made her break up with him. He was happy for El that now she had a female friend to talk with, but part of him still resented the fact that she had caused him so much grief.

"Yeah, El's just upset about her powers being gone," Mike replied with a hint of snark.

Max picked up on this, but she ignored it. She wished that Mike would realize that they both loved El, (in her case, as a friend, obviously) and they both just wanted what was best for her. And maybe she had been a little bit harsh, *maybe*, but she had just done what she thought was best for El. She hoped that she had given El

some new insights into life that Mike could not have. After all, there was more to life than "stupid boys."

"I'm sure they'll come back, El. Don't worry about it, your battery is probably just... really, really, *really*, drained," she stated with a light laugh. El smiled back. Maybe her friends were right. Maybe it would be fine.

Max stepped forward to hug El, and Mike watched, trying not to say something hostile. "Do you guys want help moving some of this stuff out?" Max asked, indicating toward all of her belongings on the shelves.

"Yes, please."

"My Mom was talking to me about maybe renting a truck to move some of the furniture," Jonathan told El, who was sitting in the backseat. "In case you want to change up the room a little bit."

El returned this comment with a polite smile. "Thank you." She was still a little bit awkward with Jonathan, she had not had many chances to talk or bond with him one-on-one. But she was hoping that would change once she officially moved in with them. This was something she was both nervous and excited for. It would be nice not having to be cooped up in a small basement, and maybe get some more proper food for a change. Even she could get sick of Eggos at *some* point.

They pulled into the driveway of the Byers', and Jonathan turned off the engine. "Okay, guys," he announced. "Final stop."

"Alright, let's grab those boxes," Dustin called out, clapping his hands together. Each of them grabbed one of the cardboard containers and started hauling it into the house, placing it onto the living room floor.

"Hey, guys," Joyce greeted them, walking in from the kitchen "Everything good?"

"Yeah, we're fine, Mom," Will replied. "We're going to need that truck for tomorrow, though. I think El wants to move some stuff from her room into here."

"Yeah, that's fine. We've already planned it, we'll go over there tomorrow."

"Thank you," El said, looking to Joyce.

"Oh, it's no problem, sweetie," Joyce said, and went in to hug her. "This is your new home, and we are going to make sure that your room is perfect."

El hugged Joyce back and squeezed her hard. She always thought of Joyce as a sort of motherly figure. She remembered when they had first met, how nice she had been to her. And now she was looking at spending the rest of her life with this woman, or at least the rest of her childhood. And her sons. The thought warmed her heart.

After helping El get settled into the house, the gang had all left to go back to their respective houses. Mike had promised El to call her on the Super Com when he got home. When he left, she walked over to her new bedroom, grinning like an idiot, already looking forward to hearing from Mike.

And meanwhile, Will was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling, lost in deep, deep thought. He must have lost track of how much time was passing, because the next thing he heard was El and talking to a staticky voice coming from her room. He could not make out the words but knew she was talking to Mike. She sounded so happy. She was laughing. Even after everything, this boy was able to make her happy.

Soon he would be gone. Gone from her life, gone from his life... Okay, maybe not completely gone, but still. The point still stood. They would be moving away, and Mike and El would be able to see each other more than what, a couple of times a year? Maybe a little bit more if they tried?

And he was going to be leaving the Party, too. And Jonathan was leaving Nancy. They were leaving everyone. And for what? Nothing. At least it seemed like nothing. Why did his Mom feel that moving was a good idea? If El wasn't in the picture, maybe he could *understand* it, but *with* El? Absolutely not. After being raised in a lab as a human experiment for twelve years, she had come here. To

Hawkins. She had formed a strong attachment to this place, to the people and places here, and then it was all going to be ripped away from her.

Was there a chance that he could work together with Jonathan to maybe change her mind? Probably not, she had seemed pretty confident in her decision when they had talked about it before. But maybe all it took was something that could *really* prove to her how important it was to them that they stayed. High school was coming up, and that was going to a huge transition for all of them.

God, his mind was just a whirlwind of anxiety right now.

He was not looking forward to the day where they would have to tell El that they were leaving. At least he was not the one who would have to do it, that was his Mom's problem.

Those were his final thoughts before he drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

"How do you like your new room?"

El smiled. "It's really nice. It's going to be more similar to my old room when we move the furniture in. The walls are just a different color, that's all."

"I like the color of the walls," Mike said. "Or maybe that's just me. I've spent so much time in that house, I probably just learned to like it."

El laughed. "No, they are nice," she agreed, and then paused. "But I still miss my old room though." She was still sad about losing her old home. She didn't think anything would ever replace what she once had with Hopper.

Her Dad.

She sniffed, realizing that she felt a growing presence in the back of her throat. She tried to swallow it back, but it kept on rising.

"El?" Mike's concerned voice crackled through the speaker on the Super Com. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

How does he always know what I'm thinking? He can't even see me!
"I'm...I'm fine Mike. I just miss him."

"I know, El. I miss him too." Mike was silent after that for a couple of seconds, not knowing what to say or do. What could he do? He couldn't bring Hopper back. He couldn't snap his fingers and make El's pain go away.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked, desperate to alleviate some of the emotions that were currently crushing his girlfriend.

"No..." she said, in between little hiccups.

"Hold on," Mike said, his tone changing suddenly. "I have an idea."

"W-what?" El said, her heart lifting slightly at his words.

"Just hold on, like, ten minutes, okay? Just give me a second."

"But-"

The Super Com clicked off, and suddenly Mike was gone. El frowned. What was Mike doing? And why had he left her? She was hopeful that whatever he was planning would actually help. She had faith it would.

She fluffed her pillow and put her head down. She puffed out her cheeks with a huge exhale and closed her eyes. Now she was alone with her emotions, with no one or nothing to distract her. With every second that passed, her surroundings drifted away. She felt as though she was back in her old bed, at the cabin. She could almost hear the sounds of Hopper in the kitchen, making breakfast for the two of them. She could smell the faint scent of cigarettes and coffee wafting through the bedroom door. She could almost see him. Right there in the doorway, telling her to get up, because Mike would be here soon.

And then the image was shattered. Gone. No more than a fleeting memory that would never be realized again. And then her cheeks became wet with fresh tears, that were falling down her face silently. She struggled to hold in her gasps and cries and hiccups, but she did. She did not want to wake the rest of the house, because that would be the worst way to thank them for letting her live with them.

So she lay there, curled in a ball, and just continued to quietly sob into her new sheets, alone.

Then there was a noise.

A faint tap on coming from her right. And she looked over and saw Mike, peering through the window, his palm flat against the pane.

"Oh, my God," El muttered under her breath, but she could not deny the smile that was finding its way onto her face, through her tears.

She slid open the window for him and he stumbled through. "It's almost midnight!" she whispered at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to be here with you," he said, giving her a toothy grin. But after looking at her for a couple more seconds, he noticed that her face was red and puffy and wet. "Come here."

And El crashed into his arms, wrapping her arms tightly around his torso, not daring to loosen her grip on him, for if she did, she would just start crying even more.

"Thank you for coming," she murmured. She felt his hand tangle into her hair, and he lightly massaged her head.

"You don't have to thank me," he said. "I'll always be here for you." El caressed his back and along his shoulder blades, breathing in his scent.

"Can we lie down?" she asked him, stepping away but still keeping her hands on his shoulders.

"Yeah, sure," he said. El pulled him toward her and led him to the bed, where she crawled under the sheets. She held them open for Mike, inviting him in. Mike's mind paused for a fraction of a second, suddenly a bunch of thoughts rushing through his mind. This was the first time sleeping with El in a proper bed, not just a dingy couch in the basement. What did that mean? Did he have some kind of obligation to fill? Did El want him to do something, or just to sleep?

But before he could figure out for himself, El had already grabbed his hand and yanked him toward her. She wrapped her arms around his

body and got as close as possible to his warmth, and rested her head in the crook of his neck. Mike tentatively reached for her hair and stroked it gently, while rubbing her neck with his thumb.

"Is everything okay?" he whispered.

El breathed. "Not really," she answered. "Nothing is ever okay anymore."

It broke Mike's heart to hear words like this come out of her mouth. All he ever wanted to do as her boyfriend was to help her and make sure she was happy and loved. But right now she was hurting, hurting a lot. And there really wasn't anything at all he could do about it. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes," she murmured, without hesitation.

"What? What can I do?" he said, sitting up slightly. "I'll do anything."

El rolled over on her side to face him and gave him a sweet smile. "Just keep doing what you're doing."

Mike just nodded slowly. "Okay."

He laid back down beside her and pulled her close, and El pressed her back against his chest, so that now they were spooning and there wasn't a single part of her that was not being completely absorbed by his body. The heat emanating from his figure gave her comfort, security, pleasure, and above all... a sense of home. Happiness. A feeling that no matter what, everything would always be okay.

She suddenly felt a tickle on the skin of the side of her neck, a blow of breath. Like a refreshing puff of wind on a hot day. And then there was a connection, and Mike was planting tiny pecks on her skin, slow and gentle and lovingly. El sighed through her nose and reached behind her to tangle her fingers into his hair and she pressed his head deeper into her, and the kisses grew more heated, like a fire. A fire that was melting away all of the sadness within her as if it were snow.

The more she stroked her digits through his hair, the more the kisses grew in passion and intensity, until El was fit to explode with desire.

She rolled onto her back and snatched Mike's head in her hands and pulled it down to meet hers, and their lips met, sending a series of sparks flying through their bodies as they moved and meshed into one.

Mike had adjusted himself so that he was on top of El, putting some, but not all, of his weight on her. And El loved the feeling of being pressed so close to him, in between his body and the mattress, with no room for anything else but their passion. She separated from his mouth with a gasp for air and then brought them to the side of his neck, stroking the skin with her tongue and sucking it lightly. She moved her attention around his neck, and he moved his head upward to allow better access for her, and she continued to trace a line of burning heat all around his jaw, Adam's apple, and nearly everywhere else that her current position would allow.

And then Mike drew away from her and dove back in to return the favor, delivering the sensual contact of his lips on her neck that she was craving desperately. She lightly moaned, giving Mike the much-appreciated signal that what he was doing was perfect. As his need for her grew, he became more aggressive with his actions, using a little bit of teeth and a *lot* more tongue. It felt almost ridiculous for him to be licking and sucking her skin so much, but it felt so right at the same time, and El's gasps and moans drove him onward.

As his courage grew, he let his hands wander further down from her neck. They reached the bottom of her shirt and his fingers began to slowly move it upward, as if testing the waters to see what was okay and what wasn't.

He soon found his answer when El reached down herself and yanked the shirt upward, completely revealing her bare stomach. She sat slightly upward to allow her shirt to slide off her back, and she settled back down and pulled Mike with her, continuing to kiss him erratically.

Mike's mind was exploding with fireworks, knowing that he and El were making out and all she was wearing was a bra and her pajama bottoms. He could feel her perfect breasts touching his body through that thin layer of material, but there was something more he was craving. Something more intimate and serious. He grabbed one of El's

hands and guided it to the hem of his shirt. She immediately understood the hint he was dropping. Both her hands found the bottom of his shirt and slowly pulled it up his back, and when it got to his head they quickly separated so she could finish removing it, and then they were back, except now there were no barriers between them on the torsos, except for that pesky bra that Mike was *itching* to remove. Their stomachs and arms, and the sensation of having El's smooth, delicious skin all over his body was driving him crazy with lust, and it was only being augmented by the gentle moans that were vibrating against his lips as they came out of hers.

He cautiously reached for her tits, and brushed his fingertips across one of them, and she responded by groaning into his mouth and bucking her hips upward to meet his. Taking this as a sign to continue, he became more adventurous, massaging them and gently squeezing them, utilizing his entire hand as he engulfed the entirety of them, placing his palm flat against them and squeezing lightly with his fingers.

They were so perfect; they felt like they were made for his hand; his hand alone. He diverted his attention to the other one, eliciting another sound of pleasure from her. Her fingernails raked across his bare back, scratching him. It felt so good, to be experiencing her this way, so close, so intimate, with no boundaries. With a spike of testosterone fueled by greed, he lowered his body down hers so that he was eye level with her breasts. He now had a moment to look at them, barely concealed by the undergarment that contouring their shape beautifully.

"Why are you wearing a bra to sleep?" he asked.

"I forgot to take it off," she said breathlessly. "Stop talking." She pulled him back down to her mouth and placed one of his hands back on her breasts. Mike ran his fingers along the flesh, soft and wonderful. Remembering what he had initially wanted to do, he inhaled and brought his mouth to her the corner of her right breast, just near the inside of her cleavage.

El gasped and weaved her fingers into his hair and pressed his head into her body even more. The feeling of having Mike suck and lick her breast was enough to make her melting. She desperately wanted

him to just take her bra off, and just capture her nipple with his lips, but she knew that they had already taken a lot of steps this night, so she decided to just let Mike lead the way for the rest of the evening. He continued to tug and suction her skin, using just the right amount of everything. He latched his mouth onto another spot on her mound and sucked, *hard*.

"Oh, Mike, that feels so good," she moaned, and dug her nails into his scalp. She looked down, and saw his head buried in her chest, licking and stroking and massaging and sucking her, and was fucking *hot*.

He traced a line with his tongue across her chest from one side to the other breast where he did the same thing, and alternated between the two periodically at seemingly random intervals. It must have been ten minutes that he had spent pleasuring her breasts, applying his love to several different spots that allowed access, without removing the bra, but at times he tugged it a little out of the way, so he could get just a *little* bit closer to that special spot. But he didn't want to go fully in just yet. He wanted to take things slow and careful.

When he was done content with his job, he rose and gave El a single, passionate kiss that was only a few seconds long, but filled with love and meaning. "I think my job is done," he said, his voice deep and husky. El found it *incredibly* sexy.

"What do you mean?" she asked, biting her lip to suppress a giggle.

"We'll see in the morning, I guess," Mike replied, a hint of mischief in his voice.

Curious about his words, El raised her eyebrows. "Hmm," she hummed, and pulled him onto her and hugged him, holding him tightly. *I love you*. Was now the right time? She wasn't sure. She could never be sure. She still couldn't get that night at the cabin out of her head, that moment where she overheard Mike confess his feelings to her. If she was honest, she just wanted to hear *him* say it first.

But that was the last thing that she remembered crossing her mind before she drifted off to sleep, holding Mike while he held her.

15. Chapter 15

Welcome back everyone, thanks for the love, as always. Nothing really to say other than school is getting really busy. But I'll try to stay on top of things.

Jane Eleanor Wheeler: Thank you so much! Hope you like this chapter too, even though it's a little less steamy.

Mik El Max: Thank you!

Stranger Records: That's exactly what I'm going for. Glad you felt the vibe!

El's eyes fluttered open, and then closed again. She didn't want to wake up, and she was angry that she had. It had interrupted a really good dream. A *really* good dream, and it involved Mike.

She sighed, recalling had been happening in the dream. It was almost embarrassing to think about it, how she had been dreaming of it. They had been getting intimate in El's bed; they had both been naked, and they were about to actually have sex, but then she had woken up.

For whatever reason.

More and more El was finding that ever since she had read some of those magazines from Max, her mind has been wandering. Thinking about all the things that she wanted to do with Mike. Some nights it felt as if it was constant, these animalistic urges pounding in her brain.

Stupid hormones. She still had a lot more to read, but she doubted she would get through all of it. She had yet to read that article that Max had bookmarked for her, something that she had supposedly done with Lucas. That was intriguing to her, especially considering that Max had said that they had not actually had sex; so what did they do? The idea of other options was interesting to her. While the idea of actually having sex with Mike was enough to make her mental, part of her was still holding back; she was only fourteen

years old. Even she had heard that usually, it was a good idea to wait a little bit before making that final step.

Now that she was going to be away from Mike more, she knew that she should not have any problem finishing up that reading. Excluding the fact that she was clearly learning more, she found that her literacy skills had also slightly improved. With her dictionary and some questioning of Mike (without revealing where she was reading them), she had learned a lot of new words too, some not even sexual.

It made her happy to know that despite her initial upbringing, she was able to learn so much with the help of her friends. Maybe one day she would truly have a normal life, and go to high school with Mike and the rest of the party, and do normal things like hang out a park, eat in the cafeteria, study for exams, or whatever. Or maybe that was just a pipe dream.

"Morning," a scratchy voice next to her said. El turned to look at Mike, who had just begun to stir. He was rubbing his eyes. "How long have you been up?"

"Just a few minutes," she replied, reaching over to brush his hair with her hand. Mike smiled.

"What are you doing?" he asked, chuckling.

"Your hair is so crazy in the morning," she responded, giggling. "So puffy."

"Yeah, that's why I need to shower," he said, gently pulling the covers off himself. He was walking toward the door but then paused. "I'm at your house, aren't I?"

"Yes, so be quiet," she whispered loudly, trying not to laugh. "You can go out the window, the way you came."

"Oh, right." He tiptoed back to his side of the bed and was about to throw his shirt back on, but when El sat up in the bed he burst out into a smile, distracting him from what he was doing. His work from last night was clearly showing.

"What are you smiling at?" El asked, giggling.

Mike smiled proudly. "Did you enjoy what I did last night?" he asked.

"Yes," El said, almost breathless from just thinking about what had transpired that evening in her bed; when she had watched him flick his tongue over her tits and suck on her skin and gently squeeze her flesh. It had been breathtaking.

Mike's eyes flicked down to her chest and gestured toward it with his head. "Look," he said, still grinning like an idiot.

El furrowed her brow and glanced down, and gasped. "Mike," she said, almost in a panic. "What are they?" Her voice was laced with confusion and worry. All on her breasts where the bra had left exposed there were several red blotches. They didn't hurt, but they looked bad.

"They're hickies, El," Mike replied, still grinning like a fool, like he was proud of what he was seeing.

"Why are you smiling?" El asked, still a little concerned. The fact that Mike wasn't worried about it calmed her a little bit, though.

Mike paused and moved toward her. He gently placed his hands on her shoulders and nudged her backward, and her calves connected with her bedside. Mike continued to apply pressure to her until she collapsed on her back against the mattress. "Mike, what are you-

And then suddenly his lips were against her neck, gently stroking the skin with her tongue and sucking the skin. "When I do that," he breathed into her neck, separating from her for only a moment so he could speak. He separated again, "if I do it long and hard enough," followed by more kissing. El moaned lightly, and dug her nails into Mike's hair. "It leaves a bruise."

"A bruise?"

"Yeah," he murmured. "A mark. My mark on you." El quivered when she heard that. The premise of being *marked*, or... *claimed*, by Mike, it was just... wonderful. She felt amazing, like part of him had been left on her.

"What if other people see it?" she asked.

Mike sat up, and placed himself beside her on the bed. "Well," he began. "They're not really things that you want other people to see."

"You said they were marks? Why wouldn't you want to show people?" El asked, confused.

"Yeah, but, like, people don't really like it. They judge you, and they're kinda considered... tacky? Gross? I don't know. That's why I made sure to do it... you know, down there."

"Oh," El said. It seemed that every time she learned something else about the world, it just made it more and more confusing. Like for every step forward, there were two steps back. Every answer raised another question. Then she noticed something on Mike's neck and started laughing.

"What's so funny?" he said, looking incredulous.

"You have a... a hickey. On your neck. I must have done it," she said, not trying to hide her laughter.

Mike's hand instinctively rose to the side of his neck. Of course, he couldn't feel anything. "Oh, shit," he muttered, eyes widening slightly. "Is it bad?"

"I don't know. It's like this," she stated, making a circle about the size of a loonie with her thumb and index finger.

"Is it dark? Where is it?"

El got off the bed and walked to him. Ever since Mike had kissed her neck a couple minutes ago, she had been fighting the urge to kiss him. He got on her tip-toes and pulled his head down and stroked her mouth across the dark patch on his skin. "Right here," she whispered against his neck, and planted a wet kiss right on the mark.

Mike exhaled heavily out of his nose as soon as contact was made. El pulled him backward and they collapsed once again on her bed, and their lips connected euphorically. Unfortunately, the moment was not meant to last long, as Mike soon separated.

"What's wrong?" El asked, frowning.

"It's getting late," Mike said, sighing with exasperation and sadness. "My Mom doesn't

know that I left, if she sees I'm not home she'll have a fit."

El smiled. She found it endearing that Mike broke so many rules just to be with her. She valued his commitment toward her so much. "Okay. I think Will's mom and I are going to the cabin today again, so I don't know if you can come over later today."

"Okay," Mike replied with a nod. "Just call me on the Super Com whenever. I don't think

I'm doing anything today."

El realized that she could spend some time this morning reading some of the Cosmo magazines, before she went with Joyce. She smiled at the idea, looking forward to learning more about some of the things that she could do with Mike. In the last few days, the more she was with him (which was a lot) the stronger the desire that was building inside her became for something more.

She kissed Mike goodbye on the lips, and he hopped out the window and started on his jog home.

When she walked into the kitchen, she was greeted by a smiling Joyce. She was standing right behind the counter and seemed to be making up some scrambled eggs.

"Hey, sweetie," she smiled, turning her attention toward her for a brief moment before bringing her attention back to the sizzling pan in front of her. "Sleep well?"

"Yes," she replied, still fuzzy from the night Mike and her had shared in her bedroom. "Did you sleep good?" El had learned from her time with Hopper that it was the correct social convention to return the question when someone ever asked something like 'How are you?' or 'How was your day?' She was determined to build a good relationship with Joyce as early as she could.

"I slept well, thank you," she replied. "Want some breakfast?"

"Yes, please," she said, making her way to the table. She sat patiently for a few moments. "Do you want help?"

"No, it's fine, sweetie, I got it. I got some of those waffles you like in the toaster right now, they'll be done soon." As if on queue, the Eggos popped up from the toaster, the familiar aroma was already filling El's nostrils. It made her feel like she was back at home.

"Thank you," she said, while Joyce put her food on a plate and set it down in front of her on the table. She joined her at the table, sitting on the side opposite to her. She had a coffee mug in hand. She poured some sugar and milk into the cup and started to stir it with a spoon.

"So, El," Joyce began, but then caught herself. "Is it okay if I call you El? Or do you prefer Jane?"

"El," El replied, picking up one of the Eggos in her hand and taking a large bite out of it.

Joyce nodded. "I'm sorry, El," she said, rubbing her eyes, not meeting hers. El swallowed the mouthful of food in her mouth and spoke.

"What for?" She was genuinely confused. Joyce had taken her in and given her a home and had been nothing but help in her crazy life. What could she possibly be sorry about?

"It's just that the last six months, we've barely spoken," she began, looking very upset with herself. "It's almost felt like I've abandoned you, or something."

El immediately felt bad. "No, don't feel bad about that," she consoled. "It's not your fault. And you've done so much for me in the past." It was true. Joyce had helped her so much, and she was with Will, while she was with Hopper. They hadn't had any reason to cross paths in the last six months.

"I guess," Joyce sighed. "Thanks, sweetie, that means a lot to me." El grinned. She was glad Joyce was here for her. Letting her come into her house and live with her, giving her food and a home, and now she was going to take care of her for the rest of her life. At least that's

what it seemed like.

"Thank you, Mrs. Byers," she said abruptly. "For everything."

"Oh, sweetie," she replied, waving her hand. "It was the least I could do. It's what Hopper would have wanted."

Silence descended upon them, and their thoughts both started to wander to a common person. El could see it in Joyce's eyes; a shadow of sadness flashing in them. She never realized how much he had meant to her, and she could see that this was evident now. "You miss him?"

Joyce focused her eyes back on her. "Hopper?"

"Yes," she said. "You miss him, don't you?" Joyce could only nod.

"I miss him a lot," she said. Another period of silence followed, only interrupted by El's quiet chewing.

"I'm gonna get dressed," Joyce announced, sitting up from the table. "Just finish up you waffles, sweetie, and we'll leave soon." El watched as she left the room. She had a feeling that Joyce was hurting a lot more than what she had let on. Maybe Hopper had meant more to her than she previously thought.

About an hour later, the two of them got into the moving truck that Joyce had rented. There were a few pieces of furniture that she wanted to move into her room. Jonathan had offered to help, but they had the proper equipment to help them move the heavy items, and all of the things inside the dressers and shelves would be gone, so it wouldn't be too heavy, Joyce had said.

El was sitting in the passenger seat, gazing out the window, lost in thought. She was still thinking about how much the passing of her Dad had seemed to affect Joyce. She knew they were close, but was it possible that there had been some kind of romance between them? It wasn't improbable; they were both single, had apparently shared some of their youth years together, and El had seen a few hints that might have pointed toward that idea during her time living with Hopper.

A part of her always felt guilty. It was always because of her that her friends were suffering. All the bad things that happened in their lives were direct because of her. She bit back her emotions, but with little success. *Just hold yourself together while you're here with Mrs. Byers*, she thought to herself.

And worst-case scenario, if she were to break down, she supposed that Mrs. Byer's was probably one of the best people to do it in front of.

"Okay, El," Mrs. Byers said, slowing the truck down to a halt as close to the cabin as the vegetation would allow. "We'll use this path to push the stuff." El nodded in response, still only giving Joyce half of her attention.

They walked in silence to the front door. It was not until they had both stepped inside that Mrs. Byers spoke out. "Holy shit," she breathed, almost too shocked to form words. El realized that it was the first time her seeing the cabin in this state, and El could tell that she was appalled.

"The stuff is in my room," she said, leading her to the bedroom. All of her little knick-knacks had been taken, leaving only bare shelves and storage spaces; a shell of her former life that was lying right before her.

She took a deep breath, again, forcing her emotions down (which she had a lot of experience doing). "All I want is the dresser here and the table here," she stated, pointing to the small bedside table near her bed. Hopper had made both of these items from scratch in the backyard of the cabin. It was the only reason that she wanted them, really.

"Okay, they're not that big," Joyce said, putting her hands on her hips. "This is doable."

El nodded absentmindedly, still not paying one-hundred-percent attention to Joyce. Every time she tried to force the feelings of grief, sadness, and anger inside, they seemed to return with ten times the ferocity and severity, eating at her like a disease from the inside. And once again, being in her old room relentlessly stirred her and

reminded her how much better things used to be. Reminding her of all the things that she used to have; and now she was being forced into a new house, probably as a burden to the entire Byers family.

Maybe leaving this furniture here was a better idea. The pain of having to stare at a reminder of him every day for the rest of her life seemed too much to bare. But at the same time, leaving them here seemed equally as terrible. Maybe they would be better off in some ditch somewhere at a roadside, where she would never see them again.

Once again her feeling betrayed her, and she felt the tears start to unwillingly come out from her eyes. And within an instant, Mrs. Byers came to her and wrapped her arms around her body protectively, allowing her to press her face into her shoulder and vent out all of the raw pain.

"He made them for me," she choked out, barely able to speak.

"Who made what for you, sweetie?" Joyce asked, rubbing her back.

"H-Hopper," she hiccuped. "Made the desk for me. A-and the dr-dr-dresser."

She felt the grasp around her body tighten after that remark. "Oh, El," Mrs. Byers whispered. "I'm so sorry." El continued to shudder and gasp into her shirt. "Is that why you wanted them?"

"Yes," she replied. "But I don't know if it's a good idea anymore," she admitted, failing miserably at curbing her cries.

"Why?"

"Because," she wailed. "When I look at them, I keep thinking about him. It's my fault he's g-g-gone." And another explosion of tears erupted from her throat, she was almost hysterical at this point.

"No, baby, don't say that," Mrs. Byers said, nearly scolding her for believing such a seemingly ridiculous thing. But to El, it was not ridiculous at all. It was the raw truth.

"The Mindflayer wanted *me*. He did all this because of *me*. Everyone

is dead because of *me*," she cried. "I should be dead, not everyone else."

"Don't say that," Mrs. Byers soothed. "It's the Russians who opened the gate. The Mindflayer killed those people, not you."

"But he killed them to kill me!" she exploded, pulling away from the embrace that they had been sharing. "He flayed all of those p-people," she shouted. "And killed them, to kill me. I should have gone to him myself."

Joyce looked at her and felt every strand in her heart get ripped in two. What did this child do to deserve this life? She was fourteen years old, for God's sake, and this was what was on her mind? How could she think this was her fault? All Joyce knew was that she was going to make sure that she knew that it was not her fault. She couldn't even imagine how much weight this was on her conscience. And she wanted more than anything to just take it all back, to make all her pain go away. But she couldn't.

"El, sweetie-" she tried to speak, but was cut off.

"You don't know anything!" she yelled.

"Sweetie, please, I-" But her voice was cut off, but not by words, but by a guttural roar of pure fury from El as she collapsed on the floor, laying slack on the ground. It seemed as though she had completely exhausted herself, past the point of speaking or producing any coherent words. Joyce immediately went to her side and sat down next to her, and rubbed her back and head as comfortingly as she could, waiting for her to go through it. Her shoulders were shaking and her body heaving, letting out occasional quiet groan or gasp.

When she had finally calmed down, or just merely ran out of energy, Joyce took the opportunity. "El," she began, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. "None of this is your fault. The Mindflayer would have done the same thing with or without you. He still would have wanted to destroy everyone. The gate still would be open. You were just a stepping stone on the path he wanted to take."

El didn't reply.

"Everyone who put their life on the line for you did so willingly. You can't blame yourself for that. That's what Hopper did. He did that himself. You aren't the reason that he's gone." Hearing his name, El sat up, slowly but surely. She looked her in the eye.

"You loved him, didn't you?"

Joyce was cut off by the question. To be honest, she wasn't sure. But she heard the words come out of her mouth, like a reflex, controlled by her subconscious. "Yes," she murmured. "I did love him."

"Me too," El whispered. "I miss him. So much."

"I know, sweetie," Mrs. Byers said, rubbing her shoulder. "I do too."

"Mrs. Byers, I-"

"El," she interrupted. "Call me Joyce. Please."

A pause in the discussion fell over them for a few seconds. El's expression changed slightly, but Joyce could not figure out what it had changed to, and if it was a good change or a bad change.

"How are you... how are you so strong?" El asked.

"What?"

"You haven't cried at all," El pointed out. "How?"

A single tear dripped down Joyce's cheek. "Sweetie," she said softly. "That's not true. You haven't seen me the last few days. But I haven't been doing well either, sweetie. You aren't alone with this."

El looked at her, and she repeated her words once more, enunciating every syllable. "You. Are. Not. Alone. I'll always be here for you, El," she sniffed, more tears dropping down her face. "I'll always make sure that I'm there for you. And Will, and Jonathan... they'll always be there for you too."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Thanks for reading the chapter guys! Review and give a follow if you're liking it, as always. In the meantime, take it easy :)

16. Chapter 16

Hello everyone! Sorry about the wait for this chapter, I've been pretty busy with school last couple days. Advanced physics class is a bitch... I cranked this chapter out, just to fill the gap. If any of you read chapter 4, I believe it was, the alcohol night is coming up soon, I have some fun stuff planned out for that chapter. Coming soon, probably. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this one, and my apologies for the wait.

LovelyInLavander: Thank you so much! I've been working hard on it. We're getting a lot of those cloudy fall days, aren't we?

sarahlucylu: Thank you! I am trying to focus on developing the characters and relationships. Bringing this story to life is one of my main goals here.

strangerthingslover13: Thank you! El is a complex character with a lot of emotion. I'm trying to capture that as much as possible.

Bruh: You got it, chief :)

Luna0603: I'm glad you felt the emotion like I did! I'm a big fan of your work on this site, *Tied Together with a Smile* is something that I'm enjoying. You guys check Luna out too!

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: I loved those parts too! Those were two moments that I knew i wanted to have when I started to write this story.

Jean Sumnerland: Thank you :)

Juliak: No problem! Keep reading!

With a great amount of effort, Joyce and El had been able to get the furniture into the truck and into the house. When they had gotten to the house, Jonathan and Will had both ran out, telling them how insane they were for moving it themselves and not with their help.

The two of them had insisted that it had been easy, but in truth, it

had been quite difficult. But it was a bonding experience for both of them; El now felt a lot more close to Joyce. There was a familial connection growing, she could feel it. And she was thankful for it.

El was now eating dinner with Will, Jonathan, and Joyce. They were dining on a simple meal, but a good one. She enjoyed the home-cooked meal, Hopper was not one to make homemade food usually. She was eating mashed potatoes, peas and chicken.

While chewing her food, she found that Will and Jonathan were acting strange. They were barely talking, poking their food. And kept sharing knowing glances with one another, like they knew a secret that she didn't.

Like they were hiding something.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, looking at the brothers.

Jonathan coughed suddenly into his glass of milk. Will looked up, surprised by the question. "What?"

"You guys seem... upset," she said.

They didn't answer for a moment, but then Will spoke to her. "No, I'm okay."

"Yeah, I'm good. Just tired, is all," Jonathan agreed. Joyce looked concerned but did not say anything. El was getting a lot of weird vibes from all of them, if she was honest; like they were hiding something from her. She was growing frustrated. But she did not want to say anything; it was her first actual dinner with her new family, and she was not going to burden them already. She finished her last bite of food and asked to be excused. Joyce nodded, and she went to the kitchen and rinsed off her plate and left it in the sink. She left for her room and closed the door when she got there.

With her hand.

She was still adjusting to operating without her powers. Doing something as simple as closing a door was always something she did with her mind. Now she had to make a physical effort to do anything, and it was quite annoying.

El laid on her bed on top of the covers and closed her eyes, and let her thoughts consume her body. No matter how hard she tried, she could not shake the feeling that everywhere she went, something was being hid from her. She had sensed it when she arrived at Mike's house that day from Max's and heard the guys arguing about something. Mike had said, *it's better that she moves on*, or something like that. Had he been talking about her? He *had* gotten really squirrely when she entered the room, after all.

Then Jonathan and Will, and even Joyce were acting like something was wrong. Like something was happening that they knew about, but she did not. It was making her really frustrated. People were always treating her like a child; no one understood that she was no longer the scared, mute, ignorant, little girl they had found in the woods. She was now a teenager, with her own thoughts and feelings, with a future. A future where she could go to school and learn; a future where she could grow up and get a job and be successful; a future with *Mike*.

People underestimated how far she had come in the last one and a half years. She had spent so, so, so many hours in Hopper's cabin, alone with nothing but the television and books and homework had left her. She knew about math, and english, and science. She understood most social queues and concepts, and although she still was not perfectly fluent in speaking, she understood everything everybody said, and understood everything that she read. She knew when people were treating her like she was stupid, or something. The only people who she had ever felt completely comfortable with to talk to, were Mike and Hopper. They never treated her differently. They never acted like she was a child. They never gave her special treatment. They treated her like a regular person.

Even with the rest of the Party she still felt awkward at times with. Will, Dustin, and Lucas were her great friends, but they simply weren't at the same level as Mike. Additionally, she had broken down a lot of barriers with Max in the last week, but she still was not quite at the level she held Mike and Hopper to. They were the most important people in her life.

She was feeling lost; she had been for the last few days. And it didn't help that she felt like everyone was lying to her.

That was the last thing she remembered thinking before she drifted to sleep.

Max woke up suddenly, in a sweat. Her chest was heaving, and her eyes were wide open. She turned her head to look at the digital clock, and read *3:30am*. She cursed under her breath and flopped back into her makeshift bed next to Lucas. They had fallen asleep while watching a movie together on the couch; their legs were stretched out on the footrests, and Lucas's arm was flung lazily around her shoulders.

She was vividly aware of what had woken her up; it had been a nightmare. An exact repetition of what had happened on the night of the fourth. When she had run into the food court and seen Billy standing in between El and the Mindflayer; as soon as that final tentacle had punctured his chest, she had jolted back to reality, fighting terrified tears. It was not the first time she had woken up like this. Almost every night she was having flashbacks, seeing Billy in the sauna, or choking El, or getting stabbed, or the cabin being torn apart.

It was all too much.

"You okay?" Max whipped her head sideways, and saw a half-awake Lucas staring at her, his eyes semi-closed. "Why are you awake?"

"Nightmare," she replied, setting back down and cuddling close to him.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" he asked, rubbing her shoulder.

"Not really."

"Okay," he said, nodding. "That's okay."

A comfortable silence followed, their breathing in sync. Max sighed. "It's been every night, I've woken up because of something. I can't seem to get it out of my mind."

"Me neither," Lucas responded.

"You've had nightmares too?" Max asked, surprised.

"What?" Lucas chuckled. "Just 'cause I'm a guy means I can't have bad dreams?"

"No, no," Max said, retracing her steps quickly. She didn't want him to get that impression from her. "It's not that. Why haven't you told me? Why haven't I noticed?"

Lucas shrugged. "It's not important. You're all that matters right now. You're the one who's ran away from home. You're the one who's lost someone important. I'm doing fine," he reasoned. "My only priority is you right now, Max."

Touched by his words, Max leaned in and gave him a gentle and sweet kiss; brief but full of meaning and love. "You're amazing," she whispered, resting her head on his stomach. Lucas merely smiled in response.

"I don't mean to press, or anything, but aren't you worried about your parents? That the police are going to be looking for you, or something?"

Max grunted, clearly not bothered by this situation. "I don't care," she said dryly. "They can go fuck themselves. If the cops have to drag me back there, so be it."

"Damn," Lucas smirked at her. "Okay, Madmax."

"All I know is, when I get back, I really hope things are better with Neil. If I was my Mom, I would divorce his ass."

"Yeah, but sometimes things aren't that simple, Max," he pointed out. "If they were, don't you think you Mom would have done that a while ago?"

"I don't fucking know, I just want him gone," Max broke down suddenly, tears exploding from her face, and then she was burying her head into Lucas's armpit and her whole body was shaking.

Oh shit. Do something, Lucas! "Hey, hey, shhh, it's okay," he started saying to her, hugging her and kissing the top of her head. "Shhh, it's fine, you're okay. It's okay, everything will be fine, I promise."

"What's wrong with me?" Max sobbed.

"Nothing is wrong with, baby," Lucas consoled. His eyes widened suddenly. Had he just called Max "baby"? Oh Jesus, he had never called her that before. He hoped that she wasn't too weirded out by it.

Max looked at him, smirking. "Did you just call me that?"

"Ummmm..." Lucas trailed off, his eyes darting around the room, trying to look anywhere but at her. "Yeah? I guess so..."

"You're sweet," she gushed, and then leaned into him again. "Thank you so much for being such an amazing boyfriend. I don't deserve you."

"Don't say that," Lucas protested.

"It's true," she insisted. "I can't even count in my head how many times I broke up with you since we started going out, over stupid shit."

"Yeah, but that was a long time ago. Things are different now, right? I know you know that. I don't care about what happened in the past. All I want to do is be with you right now." Lucas was looking her dead in the eye, still caressing her shoulders. Max could tell just by meeting his gaze that every word he spoke was the complete and utter truth.

Max couldn't help it. She knew she was in the middle of crying, and not even a couple minutes ago she was sobbing uncontrollably into him, but now all of that sadness was fading away. Just talking to him always helped her; it was like words had healing properties or something. Her mouth parted ever-so-slightly, and she looked at him.

Lucas knew what she was thinking, and in an instant they lunged at one another and met in the middle, their mouths meeting in a moment of pure heaven for both of them. Max was feeling animalistic, and she took charge immediately and pushed Lucas down onto the couch. His back connected with the backrest and she shifted herself into his lap, straddling his hips. Diving into his neck, she

sucked and licked his skin furiously. He groaned and reached his hands upwards and cupped her breasts through her shirt, only to realize that she was not wearing a bra in her sleepwear.

"God," he sighed, and reached under her shirt and moved his hands up her belly and toward her chest. They found their mark on right on the mounds, and his thumbs flicked over her nipples. She groaned into his mouth, and he could feel himself getting more and more turned on by the second. They hadn't done anything like this for a while, mainly because Max just hadn't been in the mood or the house was too busy; but it was the middle of the night, and she *needed* to be close to him like this, badly.

Lucas directed himself sideways so they were lying along the length of the couch, and now Max was completely on top of him, grinding her hips against his lower body, feeling his hardness beneath her. It was utter paradise, and after not doing it for so long. The hormones were raging and the desire was building. But no; she was not going to take that step. She didn't want to have sex with him, not yet. She wanted to wait till she was at *least* fifteen.

Her fingertips found refuge under the waistband of the boxers he had been sleeping in, and she slid her fingers underneath carefully. Then she felt him, and she almost felt herself about to explode. She needed to thank him for all that he had done for her. She *wanted* to thank him.

"Max, you don't have to-" Lucas began, looking down at her.

"Shhh," Max shushed him, crawling back up to his head and kissing his lips. "I want to. I'm sure."

Lucas contemplated this in his mind. He wasn't going to argue with her, because that would just make her more mad. If there was one thing he had learned during his time with Max, it was that no matter what the context or circumstances were, she always spoke her mind, and anyone who wanted to question her would meet her wrath. So if she wanted to do this, he knew that she *was* going to do it.

"Okay," he replied and gave her a thankful kiss.

He watched her slide back down his body, pulling the bottom of his shirt up slightly, revealing his toned stomach. She knew Lucas had been working out a lot lately, and it was definitely showing; he was *definitely* the strongest out of all the boys. He had seen that during their stupid boy antics; playfighting, armwrestling, whatever.

She pulled his pants down his thighs, followed by his boxers, and his erection immediately sprang out.

"Fuck," Max sighed, already feeling herself getting wet at the site of it. Not wasting any time, she took him into her mouth, sealing her lips tightly around the shaft. Lucas groaned and gently placed one of his hands on the back of her head, and giving the slightest push downward. His eagerness made her proud, knowing she was doing a good job.

She went down his dick as far as she could go without gagging, which was a little bit farther than halfway, and then pulled back slowly, looking up to make eye contact with him while she did so. She made it her goal that at some point in the future, she would be able to take him all the way into her mouth.

"Jesus Christ," Lucas said through gritted teeth when she flicked her tongue over the head while jerking him off at the same time. He dared to look down, and saw her place one hand on either of his thighs, and started to vigorously bob her head up and down, all while maintaining a vacuum-like seal on his dick. She wasn't even using any of her hands, it was so fucking hot.

Lucas knew that he wouldn't last long; the sensation of it combined with the site of Max taking him so hard was going to push him over in seconds. "Fuck, I'm close, keep going."

She hummed contentedly, sending vibrations all around his member. And then all at once he tensed and reached the breaking point and exploded. "Oh, God," he squeezed her hair in one of his hands and the bedsheets in the other, and squeezed his eyes shut; his body was so overstimulated to even open them.

And then he reached his climax; fireworks exploded in his mind as his dick pulsated in her mouth, shooting jet after jet of cum into her

mouth. It was the best feeling he had ever experienced, and it always would be.

When it was finally over, she drew back slowly, leaving no semen behind. With a smirk, she got up and went to the bathroom, letting Lucas lie there, in utter heaven. He took that moment to close his eyes and thank the heavens for this amazing girl in his life. And he made a vow to himself, that no matter what, he would always be there for her, and protect her, and be with her.

No matter what.

"How much do we have?"

"A fuck ton," Steve replied, slamming down two huge cases of beer onto the dining table. "And we have whiskey and vodka in my car."

"This is going to be amazing," Robin gushed. "I'm so excited."

"I just can't wait to see El drunk," Dustin laughed. "Can I try one now, Steve?"

Steve bit his lip. One couldn't hurt, he supposed. "Yeah, go for it, Henderson," he grinned.

"Tell me what you think of it."

"Holy shit," Dustin beamed. "This is gonna sweet."

"Your first beer is always your worst," Steve advised. "I remember my first in ninth grade. It tasted awful."

"Mm-hm," Dustin replied, not really paying attention to him as he popped the tab of

the can. He leaned back in his seat and took a careful sip. His brow furrowed and he licked his lips, as if trying to figure out if he liked it or not.

"Interesting," he pondered. "It has a unique flavour."

"You don't like it, do you?"

"Nope," Dustin said, placing the almost full can back on the table. "I don't get how anyone

can like that."

"Oh, well," Steve said with a shit-eating grin. "I guess your little taste buds just can't appreciate the taste. It takes a certain level of..." he paused, and made a waving gesture with his hand as if he was thinking. "Sophistication."

"Shut the fuck up," Dustin stuck his finger up at Steve, who just laughed. "You're as sophisticated as a tablespoon."

"Uh-huh," Steve nodded sarcastically. "I'll bet you the other guys could have more than you could."

"You wanna bet on that?"

"Five bucks you can't shotgun that entire can, Henderson."

"You're on, Harrington!" Dustin shot back, and grabbed the can and tilted his head right

back. He started to drink the contents of the can, not holding back. His throat flexed and unflexed repeatedly, ripping through the liquid quickly.

"You can do it, strange child," Robin encouraged, in between sips of her drink. Steve shook his head, still not convinced.

But he was surprised when Dustin burped loudly and slammed the hollow can down on the table. "There we go," he shouted. "My testosterone is flying right now!"

"Calm down," Steve said sourly. "Your balls haven't even dropped yet."

"Balls or not, you owe me five dollars."

"Yeah, yeah," Steve pulled a crumpled five dollar bill out of his pocket. "Enjoy your money, dickhead."

"Thanks for the gift," Dustin mocked him, waving the bill around

before stretching it in his hands and planting a kiss on it.

"You guys are unbelievably stupid," Robin chastised them. "Boys, indeed."

"Get me another!" Dustin yelled. "I'll show you who has sophisticated taste buds."

Steve placed a second can in front of Dustin. "Knock yourself out," he said. "You want a second round, Robin?"

"Sure," she replied, holding out her hand, accepting the second drink. She glanced up, enjoying the cool night air by Steve's pool. This had become one of her favourite places to relax; she and Steve had been spending a lot of time together recently, and the patio was an incredibly nice place. The furniture was comfortable and the pool was still and illuminated. The forest facing the back of the property brought an eerie yet calming, bringing a face of nature into the world for her.

"When are we gonna invite the rest of the dinguses?"

"I don't know, probably later this week when my parents are out," Steve replied. "And when we both have a day off from work." Robin nodded.

"It's gonna be a fun night."

There we go. Another chapter done. I hope it was a good read. Remember to leave a review, the feedback on last chapter was amazing, I love you guys so much. And if you're enjoying this story, give a follow! I have a lot more to do here :)

17. Chapter 17

Alright guys, welcome back. Sorry for the wait with this one, midterms are coming close and school's a bitch. Enjoy the chapter :)

Guest: You're right, that conversation won't be good at all... I have some ideas for when the time comes.

Bruh: No problem, read what you want. Thank you, I try to make it seem as real and intimate as possible :) And thanks for your support, you've given me a lot of reviews. I appreciate it.

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: I actually don't even know how to use break lines. I have just been skipping lines and doing the three dashes (-) to break it up. I understand your hesitation when it comes to the alcohol, but I promise it won't be bad. I'm gonna keep it tame, and only plan for it to be a one time thing. One of the things I wanted to do was to depict teenage-hood in a real way, and I think that some recreational drug use and alcohol is a part of that. I'm not sure where I'm going to go in the future, but don't worry... I'll keep things nice. I assure you, we won't be having any crackheads in the Party :) Thanks for you continued support, Star!

El cracked her eyes open slowly, and was immediately met with blinding light coming in from her window. She groaned and rolled over in the sheets and buried her head in her pillow, letting the softness and comfort envelop her. Something that her real life was lacking these days. Her thoughts went back to the previous night at dinner, when she got the vibe that things were being hidden from her by the Byers family. Her idea that they were hiding something from her, or at least trying to keep her from asking questions.

Pushing those thoughts aside, she got out of bed and made a beeline for the shower, eager to rinse off and clear her head. After shedding her clothes she stepped into the tub and turned the water on and tilted her head up and let the water run onto her face. It slicked her hair down and it stuck to her skin and face. She didn't bother pushing it away, getting lost in the feeling of just having a moment to be calm

and think about her life.

She always enjoyed showers; sure, she had her bed, and some private time, but there was just something nice about stepping into a little box and letting hot water cleanse you, rinse away all the pain and worries just for a short amount of time. She looked down and saw the red marks on her breasts that Mike had left, and smiled to herself. It had felt so good, and she would have given anything to be with him for longer. But they had slept together, and it had been nice. Waking up next to him was like waking from a great dream, except the dream did not end when she woke up. It just continued.

But then she started thinking about that thing; the conversation she had party overheard. Mike saying that it was better for someone to move on. And then he lied to her about what they were talking about. She was almost positive that he was lying. But if she was honest with herself, part of her did not want to pursue it. With all of the stuff happening in her life right now, would it be best just to let it slide? If it was a huge deal, Mike would have told her. And maybe whatever he was hiding, maybe it was best for her that it was being hidden. But how could she know for sure if she didn't know for sure?

Her mind was spinning, not having a clue what to think or do. She decided that she would maybe bring it up the next time the two of them were together and they were alone. But she would be nice about it; she would not dump him, no matter what. Doing that before had been a mistake; she just got caught up in the moment with Max, and wanted to make her happy. But Max just wanted what was best for El, and if that being with Mike, El knew she would accept that.

Nodding to herself, she resolved that she would try to talk to Mike about it, at some point. Later; not today, maybe not tomorrow, but at some point. She finished washing off and stepped out of the shower to greet the rest of the family for breakfast.

A few days had passed, and the middle of July was upon the party. Moving on from Starcourt was being a slow process, but as a group, they were getting better. Max still had not heard from her parents, which she was happy about. She had been staying with Lucas for the past few nights, and he had managed to hide her from his parents successfully. "And you made fun of me for hiding a girl in *my*

basement when we met El," Mike had teased him one day.

"Yeah, and look where we are today," Lucas had dismissed him. "I've apologized to you both for that, you know?"

"I know, I'm just teasing you."

Hopper's funeral was coming up, something that Joyce had been working hard to coordinate with some other people in town. The Party admittedly was not looking forward to it, not because they didn't want to honour Hopper, but because they knew it would stir up a lot of emotions. Especially for El, who was still in deep mourning for Hopper. It was getting a little bit better, slowly. Mike had been working hard to be there for her every day; coming to visit as much as he could, answering calls on the Supercom in the middle of the night after a bad dream. Joyce was doing her best to make sure El had all she needed, and Will and Jonathan were also supporting her.

She was starting to find that, despite her past attachment to Hopper, perhaps she would be able to find a true home with her new family. The ghost of her first true father would always haunt her, but perhaps that could be a good thing. Maybe not to think of it as a ghost, but as a spirit, or a memory, watching over and protecting her. That was a pleasant thought. Or at least a spin on a bad thought.

She turned off the water and stepped out. She dried herself off carefully; she always made sure to be careful with drying off, she hated being wet. Even though she loved her showers, part of her always disliked water from her memories in the Bath.

She through on some of the clothes that she had got at Starcourt with Max. She paused to look in the mirror, and a smile spread across her face. It made her so happy that Max had taken her shopping; it seemed like she had discovered a part of herself that she never knew existed. Over her body she was wearing a romper, like the one she had worn after leaving Starcourt, except it was a different design. The main colour was red, and it had a couple splatters of black on it.

After a quick breakfast shared with Will, she went back to her room in hopes to get some more Cosmo reading done, but her process was

interrupted by the ringing phone. She picked it up. "Hello?"

"El! Hi! It's Dustin! How are you?" he practically shouted into her ear. El recoiled a little bit from the phone. You could always count on Dustin to be the loudest person in the Party.

"Hi, Dustin. I'm doing good. What about you?"

"Great! I was with Steve last week, it was amazing! He gave me some beer, at first it tasted terrible but then he dared me to chug a can and it was great and I think I got a little bit drunk but I'm not sure, maybe I was just dizzy from being tired, I haven't gotten a full sleep in like two weeks-

Will grabbed the phone from El, and she silently thanked him for doing so. She had no idea how to get Dustin to stop talking sometimes. "Dustin!" he yelled into the telephone.

El heard some indiscernible mumbling coming from the speaker. Then Will, "you drank what?" Another pause. "You drank beer?"

More talking from the other end. "I don't know if that's a...No, I don't think that's a good idea, Dustin, I... yeah, I *know* my Mom drinks sometimes, but she's an adult... No, we aren't 'basically adults,' we're fourteen...Okay, okay, Jesus, fine, I'll come to Steve's tonight... Okay. Alright, I'm in."

He hung up and rubbed his eyes. "What did he want?" El asked. "Why was Dustin drinking beer? Isn't that only for grown-ups?"

"Uh, yeah, usually," Will mumbled, walking around the room. "But you know, like Mike said, 'We're not kids anymore.'"

"What?"

"Never mind," he said, waving his hand. "Looks like we have a night of swimming and drinking ahead of us," Will said.

"Drinking?"

"Alcohol," Will clarified. "Beer, and I think Dustin might have mentioned whiskey, too? I don't know."

"Do you want to drink, Will?" El asked.

"What?" Will looked at her confused.

El cleared her throat. She could tell Will was having doubts about Dustin's proposal. And she wanted to make sure Will was going to be perfectly fine with what they were going to be doing. She didn't want him to feel uncomfortable, after all.

"Do you want to Steve's tonight? Or are you just doing it because Dustin wants you to?"

Will shook his head, as if trying to shake away his thoughts. "No, I'm fine, I want to..."

"Friends don't lie, Will."

Will threw his arms up in the air. "No," he said sharply, making El draw back a little bit. "I don't really want to, El. I don't think drinking alcohol is a good idea, there's a reason why it's not legal for kids to drink. What if something happens?"

"But Steve will be there," El pointed out. "He'll make sure nothing bad will happen. Dustin said he's a... a good 'baby-sitter.'"

"Uh-huh," Will rolled his eyes, not surprised by his friend's antics, nor convinced. "I don't know, I know that I patched things up with Mike, but a part of me still doesn't really like where the Party is going."

El was confused. "I don't understand, Will," she stated. "What do you mean?"

"I don't like that everyone seems to be growing up without me. I missed out on a year of my life because of all this... this *fucking* Upside Down demo-whatever-the-fuck bullshit!" he yelled. "And for the last six months, where my life was actually somewhat normal again, all everyone wanted to do was spend time with their girlfriends, and not do anything fun anymore."

El was taken aback. She never had a clue Will felt this way, and she definitely had no idea that she had been stealing Mike away from him for so long. Immediately she felt terrible, but she didn't know

what to say.

"And now," Will continued to rant, "Instead of doing something like playing D n' D, we're going to Steve's to get drunk. Like a bunch of stupid teenagers. Like a bunch of fucking hooligans." He was breathing heavily, out of breath from yelling. It was a good thing no one else was home, because Joyce and Jonathan would have been hounding him at this point.

El inhaled. She honestly had no idea what to say. She had just learned that Will felt like she had stolen Mike away from him, and at the same time, stolen part of his childhood away. She needed to apologize. "Will, I-"

"I'm sorry, El, I don't have anything against you, I know you didn't mean to do any of that, I know," he quickly backpedaled, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "And Mike apologized and said that he was going to be better. It's only been like a week and a half, so I can't really say he's breaking his promise or anything."

If there was one thing that El knew for sure, it was Mike's loyalty. Sure, he could get distracted or possessive, and sometimes lose sight of what was important. And she now knew that he had been excluding his friends in favour of her for the last six months. But, if Mike had told Will he was going to do better, then he would do better. El was sure of it.

"You're his best friend, Will. Don't worry, he will follow his promise. I know he will," she assured him.

"I hope so," Will grumbled, cooling off still from his outburst. He was still pacing around the room slowly.

El was thinking, and decided that she needed to get something off her chest. "Will?"

He turned to look at her, scratching the back of his neck expectantly. He made eye contact, and that made her a little bit nervous about she wanted to say. "Yeah?"

"I..." she trailed off. *Come on, El, you have to say sorry.* "I'm sorry. That

I took Mike from you guys. I didn't want that to happen. I thought you guys were okay with it, but you weren't. I'm sorry. I promise I'll make sure not to... not to keep him all to myself."

Will went wide-eyed, and starting shaking his head quickly. He instantly launched into a nervous ramble. "No, no, no, El, I'm not mad at you, I-I was just upset with Mike, I know that you didn't know, and I don't expect an apology from you or anything, but-" he abruptly stopped speaking, realizing that he was blabbering like a fool. "Thanks, El. For apologizing. It means a lot to me."

Not able to find the right words to reply with, El just nodded. A sort of awkward silence fell upon the room, and it came to her that she had another question that she wanted to ask.

"Are we... are we siblings now, Will?"

Will slightly startled, but didn't show it in his body language, just in his mind. Were they siblings? Hopper and Joyce were never a couple, officially. Sure, they were close, but he thought that the only person in his Mom's heart was Bob. And he knew that for a fact; he had seen his Mom many times looking at the drawing of him on the fridge, or staring at old photos they had taken together. A part of her had never moved on from Bob, that was certain. But had another part of her secretly had feelings for Hopper as well?

Disregarding her relationship Hopper for a moment, was Joyce going to formally adopt El? He saw no other alternative. She was going to be living with them, and every child needs some sort of legal guardian; that was irrefutable. She was going to have to go to school, get viable legal identification for when she finally started to go out into the world, among other things. You needed to have a parent to do all that. So he supposed that it was just a matter of time before they were considering siblings, or at least step-siblings.

Did he want them to be siblings? He didn't quite know. He certainly cared for El; he had saved his life on more occasions that he could count. He valued her as a friend, and certainly wanted what was best for her. He had made that evident during the argument about moving away with his Mom. He wanted what was best for all his friends, and El was no exception. But siblings... that was something entirely

different, and to be honest, he hadn't really thought about it that way yet.

"Yeah, El," he answered. "Yeah, we are siblings, I guess. As soon as my Mom adopts you, it'll be legally official, but to me, we are siblings. Brother and sister." He was happy with that response. He was happy with it because it was the raw, unaltered truth.

"And Jonathan too?"

"Of course. We're family now," he confirmed. "For better or for worse," he joked, eliciting

a tiny giggle from El.

"And I guess that means my Mom is your Mom too," he thought aloud. Now *that* was kind of a weird concept. Sure, the idea was basically synonymous with "siblings," but when you thought about it that way, it was just... he couldn't find the right word. *Whatever. It's not strange. You're just being weird.*

"Are you okay with that, Will?" El asked.

Shit. Was he being that obvious? "Oh, no, of course, El, having you as a sister sounds awesome. You're a great person. It's just that the idea of my Mom having a new kid it just... a little odd. Or something. I don't know. It's just... a lot of change is happening right now. It's hard to keep up, I'm sure you can relate to that."

"Yes," El replied, knowing all too well about that. Good change, bad change, whatever. Her life had been a whirlwind since the day she had met Lucas, Dustin and Mike in the woods.

"I guess we have more in common than we think," he grinned. He was finally building a connection with the girl that meant so much to his best friend. Sure, it had only taken over six months, but that was okay. The important thing is that it was happening now, when it mattered most. There was a bridge being made here, he could feel it.

"Don't worry about tonight with Dustin and the alcohol," El said, assuring her *brother*. "It'll be fun to be with the party. You might enjoy it, even."

Will thought about it. He decided she was right. It was the beginning of July, the height of the summer was still upon them. They had been through the ringer for the first couple days, but they had the rest of the season laid out in front of them, waiting to be experienced. And he was going to experience it to the fullest, not a worry in his mind. Or at least he would try his damn hardest.

"Alright, yeah. Let's do it."

18. Chapter 18

Hello everyone! Sorry for not posting in a while, my english teacher is a fucking asshole. But I just got a huge project done today, so I threw this together for you guys just to tide you over. The night at Steve's is coming next chapter, which I think is going to be two part event, maybe three. Depends on how in-depth I want to go with it, but I'm expecting to have the next chapter out a lot sooner.

This chapter is a bit of filler, with some Lumax. I know some of you guys might not be too happy about that, but this was a plotline that I wanted to wrap up, and I promise from here on out I am going to place a much bigger emphasis on Mileven and such. So don't worry :)

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: Yeah, Will and El's dynamic is something that I'm hoping to see a lot of in S4. And yeah, I agree that 14 is a little early, but you're right about the pressure. That was around the age that I first drank for fun with friends, and it was really fun, so I just figured I'd try the idea out. Let me know what you think when it happens :)

Stranger Records: I'm glad you like it! I am too.

Bruh: I think you're the person who objected to Lumax in the beginning so... I'm sorry, lmao XD but don't worry, next chapter will be great.

Luna0603: Thank you so much! I'm glad your enjoying reading it as much as I am writing it. You may be on the right track with El and Mike there... haha

Guest: I think you're right, Will wasn't blameless; but there was some wrongdoing on both sides, but that's the nature of growing up, am I right?

Max was in the middle of a heated make-out session with Lucas when a really aggressive pounding came from the door. It was abrupt and deafening, and the whole house shook nearly down to its foundation.

She shot up from her position where she was lying on Lucas's body as quick as she could. Concern washed through her body. His parents were not supposed to be home now, and they were right here in the living room.

"Is that your parents?" she whispered sharply. "Didn't you say they were gonna be gone for longer?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought, at least," Lucas muttered in response, shifting himself off the couch and started to tentatively make his way toward the door. "Hide in the basement, let me see why they're home so early." Max nodded, and darted toward the stairs.

Sighing, Lucas opened the front door and was greeted by an unappealing site. A cop car was parked on the street in front of the lawn, and two stern looking officers that Lucas didn't recognize were glaring at him with menacing eyes. *I wonder why*, he thought.

He swallowed heavily. "Is there a problem, officers?"

"Maybe," the one on the right replied. He squinted at Lucas a little bit. "Is Maxine Mayfield in this house?" Lucas's mouth went dry. How did they know? *Did* they know, or did they just have a hunch? If he was to lie to them and say that Max wasn't here, would they come in anyway? Didn't they need a warrant to do that? Should he *ask* if they have a warrant? Jesus Christ. They were cops, he couldn't just lie to them. Max wouldn't want him to get in trouble with the police because of her, but she also didn't want to go back to her house, and he knew almost certainly that they were here to just that.

"I'm here," a voice from behind Lucas spoke out. He whipped around, and saw a shy looking Max slowly walk around the corner to face the police officers. "And my name is Max. Not Maxine," she added, with a little bit more force and sass. Lucas held in a smirk. One had to respect her personality and fearlessness. Not even a police officer would get away with calling her by Maxine.

"Miss Mayfield, you're coming with us," the officer on the left stated. He phrased it like a statement. There was no question about it.

"Uh, where are you guys taking her, exactly?" Lucas piped up,

wanting to know if she was going back to her house.

"That information is unimportant to you," one of the replied shortly, not bothering to make eye contact with him. *Fair enough*, he thought. He supposed that was the proper procedure, not to disclose personal information around other people about a person. It's not like they knew that he was her boyfriend, and that she wouldn't care.

"Where are you taking me?" Max asked sharply, no longer bearing that shy attitude she had when she had first come face to face with them. "And you can tell me in front of him, thank you," she said, nodding her head at Lucas.

"Tell you what," the officer said, his tone of voice betraying the fact that he was clearly losing patience. "We'll tell you everything you want to know when you get in the car."

Fighting the urge to make a snarky remark, she wrinkled her nose and stepped forward to put on her shoes. This was an uphill battle, and one she would not win, even she knew that for sure. After giving Lucas a quick hug and a peck on the cheek (she didn't feel entirely comfortable with public displays of affection in front of two intimidating policemen), she walked out the door, not bothering to see if she was even being followed.

Lucas watched Max walk across the lawn, and the two officers looked back at him with a grudging stare, as if he was doing something wrong for not dating another black girl. He felt a spark of courage, saying "Is there anything else you guys need, or can I close the door?"

"Watch your lip, boy," one of them spat back, and then stalked off, followed by the other one. Once they were out of earshot and turning away, he cursed them under his breath and flipped them off before closing the door.

Max sat nervously in the back of the police cruiser, twiddling her fingers apprehensively. Her mind was a whirling hurricane of thoughts, and she was finding it impossible to focus on a single coherent idea. She was feeling too nervous and afraid to ask them where it was they were taking her, but she was assuming her house. It was a drive that was only a few minutes, and she had been sitting

there for only about thirty seconds, so the possibility was not ruled out.

If they were going to take her to her house, why had the police come to do it. Why hadn't her Mom come or something? Or maybe her Mom had no idea at all that she was on her way right now. It was possible, she supposed. And if she was being taken back, did that mean that the issue with her Mom and Neil had been resolved? Or would she be walking right back into the storm?

Whatever the case, she was hoping it would be resolved by the evening, because earlier a very hyper Dustin had radioed them, yelling about Steve having alcohol and the rest of the Party meeting at his house to do some drinking. She had been excited for that since he had called. The Party was sure to get up to some fun antics tonight, and she wanted to be a part of that.

The waiting was getting to be too much, so she plucked up her courage and put on her mask of fearlessness and spoke. "Where are you guys taking me?"

"Your house," came the immediate response, devoid of emotion.

"Do my parents know I'm coming?" she asked, genuinely curious what the case regarding that matter would be.

"No, they don't."

Okay. So that was one thing confirmed. She was going to be dropping in, unexpected, right at her doorstep, to be most likely be greeted by her hysterical Mom and dick step-dad.

Fun.

She didn't have much time to think about anything else before the car came to a steady stop, and she looked out the window and saw her small, dingy house. She shuddered, already fearing what would happen as soon as she stepped through that door.

"Out you get," the officer in the driver's seat commanded.

"Uh-huh," Max absent-mindedly replied, trying to show the men that

the obvious disdain for her was mutual. "Thanks for the ride," she threw in, but made sure to make it sound very sarcastic. Before a reply could be said, she slammed the door shut and strutted to the front door of her house. She was about halfway up the walk when her Mom came flying through it like a bat out of hell, her arms wide and tears rushing down her face.

"Max! Oh my God, sweetie..." her voice faltered and then suddenly she was swallowing up her entire body in a bone crunching embrace. She was shocked that her Mom could even move that fast. She allowed the hug to continue a little bit longer before it became painful.

"Mom, let go of me please, I can't breathe," she said, allowing a small smile to form on her lips. Her Mom pulled back, her face showing all her emotion; the days of stress since she had ran away showed on her face, dark circles etched into the skin under her eyes. But despite that, she was still shining with relief and happiness that her precious daughter was home and safe.

"Come inside, sweetie, please," she said, almost a beg. "We need to talk about something," A pang of nervousness hit Max's body. That didn't sound good. Talk about what? Something to do with her running away? Something to do with Neil, maybe? That seemed more probable.

"Okay," she managed to croak, following her Mom into the house wordlessly. She followed her to the dining room, where her Mom took a seat and gestured for her to sit down next to her. After doing so, she watched her breath in deeply and folded her hands in front of her.

"Is Neil here?" Max asked quietly, wondering why she hadn't noticed his truck in the driveway on the way in.

"No," she replied, not meeting Max's eyes. She gazed at her hands, fiddling with her ring finger, which she noticed, was bare. The ring from Neil was gone. Suddenly her heart was rising and she could feel warm hope coursing through her veins. Did this mean what she thought it meant? Was Neil gone from their lives?

"Where's your ring?" Max asked, hoping for a certain answer.

"We're getting a divorce," she abruptly announced, speaking rather loudly. Max startled. "Sorry, that was just... hard to say, I guess," her Mom said, still never meeting her daughter's eye. Why was she acting like this?

"What's wrong, Mom?" Max finally questioned, wanting to know that despite this great revelation, that Neil was going to be gone, her Mom still appeared to be upset. But for what reason?

"Because I didn't want a divorce, Max," she said, throwing her hands in the air in exasperation. "I know he wasn't the nicest man, but... but he was nice to me, at least when he first met. He helped our family, he made sure we were taken care of."

"Taken care of?!" Max exploded, rising out of her chair suddenly. How was her Mom upset about this? That vile piece of shit was gone from their lives forever! "Why are you upset about this, Mom?!"

"Max, I-"

"He beat the shit out of Billy on a daily basis!" she screamed, pacing around the room. "He emotionally abused you over and over again, and you're upset that he's gone? Are you shitting me?"

Her Mom- wait. How was this person even her Mom? She didn't deserve to be her mother right now. This was just some stranger in her life who lived in the same house as her. *Susan*- had tears falling from her eyes at this point. Fuck that.

"Max, sweetie, he wasn't emotionally abusing me, I just made so many mistakes, you don't understand."

"No!" She was starting to see red, blinded by the sheer frustration of it all. "Listen to what you're saying! You've obviously been brainwashed by him. You think that he was doing us good? Your wrong!" she shouted, and then stormed out of the room, blocking out the distressed cries coming from the dining room. She went into her room and slammed the door shut, and buried her face into the sheets of her beds and erupted into tears, not holding anything back now.

Her gaze turned to Billy's jacket. The jacket she had taken from his room and put in hers, just so that she could have a reminder of him, a piece of him with her. She grabbed it on both her hands and pressed her forehead to the material. It was cold.

"Why did you have to go?" she said almost silently, speaking to no one but herself. "Everything's just a mess now." She sighed. Why was she even doing this? Talking to a jacket, like she was expecting a reply or something. Jesus fucking Christ.

"Maybe Mom will come to her senses at some point," she carried on, not caring if she was talking to an inanimate object anymore. It was better than talking to nobody. "I guess it's not unheard of for people to like somebody who doesn't really like them back."

The jacket continued to lie there. "They say that sometimes girls go out with guys who are dicks," she pondered. "I thought that was just a teenager thing. Or maybe my Mom just needed to remarry, because she was short on money or something. But why would she settle on *him*? It's not like he even has a great job. We still live in this tiny house."

More silence from the jacket. Max huffed and threw it across her bed where it landed on the end of it. She closed her eyes, but then the image of Billy getting stabbed over and over by the Mindflayer came right into her mind. With a strangled gasp her eyelids flew up. She knew she would never be able to get that image out of her mind. That was the truth. The truth that her parents would never know. Her brother hadn't died in a fire, he had been brutally mutilated by a monster right in front of her and her friends. And she also knew that he would never get proper justice. He would go on to live in the hearts of the few people who cared about him as just another unfortunate soul who died in the fire of Starcourt Mall. Not as a hero. As a nobody.

Staring at the ceiling, her brain began to unwillingly drift away, disconnecting from her body before she lulled away into a painful sleep.

El was lying in her bed in the middle of the afternoon. And she was *bored*.

Mike was busy with some family thing, something about his Aunt's house. He had said he would be in the evening in time for their plans at Steve's house, which was something she was definitely looking forward to. She had seen Hopper drunk on one or two occasions when she was living in the cabin, and it had been hilarious. The idea of having such an experience with her friends sounded like a great night, an opportunity she would not pass up easily.

Joyce was out, running errands and putting things together for the upcoming funeral. That was something that she did *not* look forward to. She had been very vague about exactly what she was doing; El had never been to a funeral, and had asked Joyce a couple questions. Her inquiries were met with replies like, "don't worry about it, dear," or, "I'll explain later," or something like that. Once again, she was being babied.

She knew that the people in her life didn't mean anything bad by it; their gestures were not ill-advised. But all the same, it bothered her a lot. Jonathan was out with Nancy; she had no idea what the two of them were getting up to. He might have mentioned a move? She wasn't paying much attention to the breakfast conversations.

The only other person in the house was Will, and he had holed himself up in his room. El assumed that he was drawing or something. She knew that he loved to do that in his free time.

On the other hand, she had just finished reading an entire one of the magazines. It had been very informative. But something stood out to her during her reading that she was desperate to try out; and best of all, it was something that she could do on her own.

Masturbation.

Such a strange word. Just the way it sounded in her head... it made her feel gross. But apparently it was completely normal; healthy, even. And as a horny teenager, it sounded like a good enough place to start out. So she could figure out what was good for her by herself, and not have to worry about another person being with her or getting weirded out.

But she was acutely aware of the fact that just on the other side of

the wall, was Will's room. So whatever she got up to, she would have to make it quiet as hell. But thank God there was a lock on her door; so no one could barge in on her in the act.

She stood up off the bed and turned the lock, and tried opening the door herself to make extra sure that there was no way that anyone could get in. Once she had piece of mind that she was safe, she settled back on top of the bed, on top of the sheets. Where was she even supposed to start?

Might as well get the pants out of the way, she thought to herself. She shimmied out of the loose sweatpants and cast them on the ground beside the bed, so that now she was left in only her top and panties. Looking down at her underwear, she recalled some of the pictures she had seen in the magazines of other women who were wearing that weird underwear. But they had looked *really* nice. The thongs and lingerie... she wondered if Mike would like that. She doubted she could ever get her hands on any. *Oh, well.*

Her mind whirring with nervousness, she slowly reached down toward her center, and let her fingers dip underneath her panties. They brushed by her little hairs, and El made a mental note to talk to Joyce soon about getting a razor; she wanted to have soft legs and smooth skin like the models, she wanted to look good for Mike.

Not knowing quite how to start, she started to run her fingers over her folds, in between them and around them. It felt weird; the sensation that she had during her make-out sessions with Mike wasn't there. Her vagina was as dry as a desert. Maybe she had to get herself a little bit more... what was the word... wet?

She closed her eyes and crafted a mental picture inside of her mind. She imagined Mike lying on top of her, sucking and licking her all over her neck, sloppily and messily, everywhere. And at the same time, he was grinding into her, and she imagined feeling his erection through his pants poking her in between her legs.

Squeezing her eyes shut even tighter, she imagined that now he taking off her clothes, and she was taking off his, and they were getting naked in front of each other, and it was so fucking hot. Not on purpose, she let out a soft moan when she realized how wet she

was. She pressed down against her opening with her fingers and rubbed them in between her folds, making long and slow strokes along the full length of her vagina, up and down.

It felt good; but not as great as she had expected. She curled her fingers slightly and started to rub against the tiny slit harder, but the pleasure that she was craving was still not there. With her eyes still open she frowned, wondering if this was even a good idea.

No. Max had given her these magazines, and that probably meant that she was familiar with this stuff. If Max could do it, shouldn't she? All her life, she had wanted to be truly normal. Determined to go through with this, she closed her eyes once more, and returned her attention to her hand.

Her fingers were now coated with her juices; her arousal was clearly heavy. Her fingers were slick and lubricated, and she bit her lip, wondering if it was even a good idea. What if it hurt? What if it felt weird? What if...

Fuck it.

She licked her lips and pressed her index finger slowly inside of her. It was difficult; she

was so tight, and her finger, although small, seemed pretty big right now. Once she was about halfway through with her index finger, that's when it started to feel good. Deciding that she was going to all the way, she instantly plunged her entire index finger inside.

She grunted loudly at the sensation, which she had not yet decided if it was good or bad yet. Her opening was constricting her finger so much, and it was such a small space.

"El? Are you okay?" Will called from his bedroom. *Oh shit. Quiet down, El!*

"Yes, I'm okay, Will. I just...stubbed my toe," she lied.

"Oh," Will replied. "Okay." But El had barely heard his response, because now that her vagina had adjusted to the invasion of her finger in it, she realized that it felt good. *Really* good. She began to

slowly move her finger in and out, penetrating herself over and over again, and each time it felt better and better.

She let out a soft moan, she simply could not hold it back. It felt so good. She made sure to stay as quiet as possible. If Will found out what she was doing, she would probably die of embarrassment.

After about half a minute of her current routine, she found that her body had adjusted to one finger. She wanted *more*. Carefully, she pulled her index finger out, which was wrinkled from the moisture, and took her middle finger and ran it up and down her delicate folds, getting it ready to go in. Running her fingers along the outside was a different feeling, but incredibly pleasant as well. But she wanted to be inside.

She inserted the tips of her two fingers inside, and her chest heaved. She was getting

stretched so much by her fingers but it felt so fucking good, *so fucking good*. When she was about halfway with her two fingers another moan escaped her lips, but a quiet one. Stealth was key right now.

"Oh, God..." she sighed, and pressed even deeper, until both of her fingers were completely buried inside her tight little hole, and she was biting back the urge to just scream. Why the hell hadn't she done this sooner? Making slow, deep, and rhythmic thrusts, she could feel the pleasure coursing through her body. The heel of her palm started to rub against the top of vagina, and suddenly a wave of euphoria washed over her.

She had to cover her mouth with her own hand to stifle an ecstatic groan. *Fuck*. That

must be the clitoris. That little nub right above her opening, and the friction on it from her palm was the greatest thing she had ever felt. Muffling another moan with her hand, she sped up her pace, going in and out furiously, while still trying to pay a little bit of attention to her clit.

And then suddenly she felt something; it was like a wave slowly approaching, but then it started accelerating somehow. She watched

it from the beach, coming closer to her. In a flash of pleasure it crested, and her entire body spasmed as the most wonderful feeling she had ever experienced washed over her body, and her muscles started contracting with her fingers still inside. Once again clamping her hand over her mouth and biting her lower lip, she suppressed a scream. It was like electricity was flying through her entire body, but it was the most heavenly electricity ever.

Even ten seconds after, the aftershocks of her first orgasm continued to run through her veins, and she could feel her heartbeat nearly everywhere in her body, but most of all, in her aching vagina.

She couldn't even bring herself to open her eyes. Taking her hand away from her throbbing center, she continued to lie there, bathing in the pleasure and satisfaction that was still fresh in her mind and body.

"Holy shit," she whispered, and giggled in spite of herself. She was *definitely* going to have to do that again sometime soon. And maybe with Mike.

Alright guys, let me know what you think of this. Remember to leave a review, the more feedback I get the quicker I'll try to get the next chapter out! I'm shooting for Monday, maybe even Sunday. Thanks for reading, take it easy :)

19. Chapter 19

Okay, so if I remember correctly, I believe I said I'd have this chapter out on either Sunday or Monday. If I said Saturday or Sunday, I SINCERELY apologize. I remembered that promise I made to you guys as I was about to crash for the night, and I was like oh shit! I gotta get this chapter done! so here it is, I hope you guys enjoy it. I know some of you were skeptical about the whole booze party idea, but I tried to do it as well as I could, and made everything realistic, in my opinion. As always enjoy!

Jean Summerland: Thank you! It is, isn't it? I hope you enjoy this chapter too!

Vader115: It's a much nicer name then "bruh," I'll tell you that. It's technically Tuesday, but I hope you don't mind that I'm an hour late.

Guest: Interesting take. I think that Mike is going to be FUCKING PISSED when he finds out El is moving, but I might look into that side of things, I never considered it that way.

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: I'm not sure yet. I think that's a storyline I might leave for a little bit later, I'll see where the story goes.

Stranger Records: Indeed!

"So I'm pretty excited, I can't lie," Will said, putting on a light sweater. It was the evening, and the temperature outside was cooling off just slightly. He knew he would probably end up taking it off anyway, but he still wanted it just to be sure.

"Really?" El asked, putting on an extra layer of clothing as well.

"Yeah," Will replied. "I was giving it some thought, and you're probably right. It'll be a fun night, with the rest of the party... it'll be good." El turned to him and broke out in a happy grin. She was thrilled that her now-brother-in-law was finally starting to loosen up a little bit, and was willing to explore a little bit more.

Mike had told her before that Will had been obsessed with Dungeons and Dragons or whatever. Unfortunately, the Party had been drifting away from that game for a while, and it seemed like Will had been... lagging. Maybe now he was finally starting to come out of his shell and catch up with the rest of them. Because as she had heard many times from many people...

We're not kids anymore.

What a scary thought. Eighteen months ago, they were a bunch of twelve-year-olds with squeaky voices and who were barely over five and a half feet tall. Now everyone seemed to be towering over her, and everyone was talking in deep voices and it was all so strange. And with her recently-found knowledge of the *sexual* aspects of things, well, that just through a huge ass wrench into the mix. She had really only noticed that side of things with Max and herself. With the broader hips and larger breasts and such, that sort of thing. With the boys, she couldn't really tell. She had never looked at anything near... there.

"You ready to go?" Will asked her, breaking her train of thought.

"Yes," she replied, stepping out the door with her.

"Okay, Mom! We're leaving!" he called out through the small house.

"When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow at eleven!"

"Where are you going, again?"

"Steve's!"

"Okay! Have fun!"

And with that, they shut the door behind them and walked down the driveway. The night air was cooler than in the day, more bearable. Mid-July in Hawkins was not a cold month; they had been sweating the entire time. A gust of wind came through and blew her hair around so that it was flying wildly behind her, like some kind of wildfire.

She loved her long hair; when she had had short hair in the past, she never really even thought about having hair like this. But she loved it. It was beautiful. She adored how it might stick to her body and back when she was wet, she loved to wash it and feel how soft and luscious it was after a shower. She loved it even more when Mike tangled his hands into it as he kissed her and moved against her, like that night a couple of days ago in her bed.

God, that night had been amazing. It was like a dream that kept coming back into her hand whenever she wasn't, at that exact minute, thinking about something. She closed her eyes, and all she could see or feel was Mike's hips pressing into hers, his lips on her breast.

No. Calm down. She couldn't be having this on her mind when she was hanging out with the rest of her friends. That wetness between her legs that she had been having a lot recently wasn't something that she wished to be dealing with in the same room as anyone but Mike.

"You wanna cut through the woods?" Will asked her, pointing his thumb over his shoulder toward the dark trees. "It'll save us some time."

El's heart skipped a beat at that idea. Walking through the dark woods, alone? With her powers gone? Through Mirkwood, no less. The same place where a whole *bunch* of stuff had gone down in the past. Nothing would happen, she was overthinking it.

"Sure," she responded, with a nod and a heavy breath.

They started on the trek through the woods, ignoring the chill that seemed to keep running up and down her spine with every noise. Come on, she had dealt with a lot worse than this in the past, right? She was El Hopper. Jane Ives. A forest was no big deal. She looked up and saw the leaves against the sky, forming a beautiful skyscape. In between the branches nestled a full Moon, glowing and bathing the land in its rather pleasant light.

She blinked and found herself staring at the large house, the home of Steve "the hair" Harrington. They had made it. The walk hadn't been so ba-

"HELLOOOOO!" a scream sliced through the air like a sword and Will and El jumped back. El even let out a shriek of surprise. They whirled around and came face to face with a laughing Dustin.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, dude?!" Will yelled. "I almost shit myself! You're lucky El's powers are still gone, you clown!"

Dustin was wheezing with laughter, barely paying attention to them. "I told you guys!" he called toward the house. "You guys said, 'noooo, they won't come through the woods, they're too scared,' but I knew they had the balls! And what did I tell you!? Pay up, Harrington!"

"Fuck off!" another voice called, and El saw a silhouette growing as it walked toward them. The light washed onto the figure and she saw that it was Steve, holding a can of beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

"What's up, guys? You okay?" he said, taking a drag from his cigarette. "Wait, are you guys siblings, now?"

"No, not yet. We haven't adopted her," Will clarified.

"Uh-huh," Steve nodded, pursing his lips. "Wanna come in? It's chilly out here, much warmer inside."

The two teens nodded eagerly, wanting to get out of the cool evening air that was turning chillier by the minute. Steve led them across the patio and around the pool, and through the sliding glass doors into the main area of the house. They were greeted by a group of giddy teens who were seated around a large circular table, eyeing a full bottle of Jack Daniels in front of a pyramid of beer cans. They barely even noticed that they had entered the house until Will said hello.

"Hey, guys," he said, waving. El waved too, but didn't bother speaking. Everyone at the table turned to look at them, and Mike was the first to spring out of his chair and rush to his girlfriend, quickly giving her a tight hug. She returned the embrace, taking in a deep breath and inhaling his scent. It smelled like he was wearing some kind of cologne? It smelled good.

Really good.

Mike pressed a kiss to her forehead. "How are you doing? Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm good."

Everyone else exchanged their greetings from the couches they were seated on. Lucas and Max were curled up close together, with Max's legs folded up, leaning onto the shoulder of her man. Lucas had his arm thrown lazily around her body, rubbing her shoulder absentmindedly as if it were a reflex.

El had noticed that since July fourth, Max and Lucas had seemed to have gotten a lot closer. She wasn't quite sure what had changed, if anything, but something about them seemed more... intimate. More serious, more loving, just more of everything. That made her glad, because she always thought that Lucas and Max had sort of a silly relationship at times. The constant bickering, always arguing. And Max had 'dumped his ass' *five times* since they started dating. How was any kind of relationship like that meant to be taken seriously?

But now they seemed to have come to their senses, and that made her happy for both of them. Whatever they had sorted out between the two of them had made them a lot stronger as a couple.

"Alright!" Dustin shouted, walking in from the kitchen carrying very small cups. "Everyone sit down!" he hollered.

"Relax, Henderson," Steve chastised. "You haven't even had a sip and you're already acting like your drunk."

"Drunk?!" Dustin repeated, bewildered. "Certainly not. I'm drunk off of testosterone! I bet you I can outdrink everyone here."

Steve glared at him. "Uh-huh," he rolled his eyes, sitting down on the armchair that was positioned at the head of the oval-shaped table. "Alright guys, sit down."

El immediately gravitated toward Mike, and took a seat practically on his lap she was so close. "Mike," she asked. "Why are those cups so small?"

He chuckled. "Those are shot glasses, El," he answered. "You pour

strong alcohol in them and then drink it all at once really quick. It's called a shot."

"Okay," El nodded. "But... what do you mean by 'strong'?" How could a drink be strong? What did Mike mean by that?

"I don't really know," Mike answered honestly. "I've never had alcohol before. Apparently, it, like, burns or something? I don't know. I guess we'll find out together," he said with a smile, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

It burns? That didn't sound good. Was this safe? El was finding herself second-guessing herself now. But if Mike wasn't concerned, she supposed that she did not have anything to be concerned about either.

"Okay, guys," Steve said loudly, clapping his hands together. "So I'm gonna give all of you shitheads a shot of whiskey. It's forty percent, which means it's pretty strong. The question is, do you guys want to start with the shot, or a beer first?"

The Party all looked around, having no idea what to choose. None of them had drank before. "The beers aren't as strong, I'm assuming?" Lucas asked.

"No, they're five percent," Dustin answered. "I say we start with the shot. That way, the beer will go down way easier for you guys."

"You guys'?" Max repeated. "What do you think you are, some sort of forty-year-old Dad who's a seasoned drinker? Have you ever even had a shot before?"

Dustin opened his mouth to shoot back a snarky remark, but then closed it. "No, he

hasn't," Steve butted in. "He's just talking out of his ass."

"Shut the fuck up, Steve!" Dustin said, reaching for the Jack. "I'll drink this entire

thing right now!" He picked up the bottle and waved it around in the air.

"Hey, watch it, dumbass!" Mike said. "Don't drop it, it's glass!"

"Try to drink all of it, Henderson," Steve challenged. "I *dare* you to," he added, with a cheeky smirk.

"Consider it done," Dustin said. He unscrewed the cap and lifted the mouth of the bottle to his lips. He tilted his head back and the liquid poured into this mouth.

His entire body recoiled and he spat the liquid out all over the table, and nearly dropped the bottle before catching it in both his hands and placing it back on the table. He gagged several times, his entire body convulsing as if he were a cat about to throw up. Everyone screamed with laughter.

"*What the FUCK!*" he yelled, sticking out his tongue and panting. "People drink that shit?!"

"Yeah," Steve said, laughing his ass off. "You pussy. Couldn't even stomach a single drop."

"Screw you, Steve," Dustin sulked, walking to the kitchen

"Where are you even going, you clown?"

"I need water!" he called, disappearing around the corner. "It feels like my mouth is on fire!"

Once he was out of earshot, Steve leaned toward them and whispered. "Don't listen to him, he's just being a drama queen," he assured them. "You guys can start out with the beer, and maybe we'll bust out the Jack later. The night is still young, my friends."

"I'm down," Will said. "May I?" he asked, pointing toward the stack of cans stacked on the table.

"By all means, Byers," Steve replied, grabbing a can for himself. He leaned back in his armchair. "Help yourselves, guys."

Everyone grasped a single can and popped the tab open. Mike was about to sip it when Lucas yelled. "Wait!" Everyone turned to look at him, their puckered lips inches from their cans. "I think we should

propose a toast before we drink," he said, raising his beer a little bit over his head.

Everyone laughed and did the same. They all raised their cans above their heads and looked at Lucas, all of them sporting grins on their glowing faces. This was going to be an awesome night, and Lucas wanted to make sure that it was started right.

"This is gonna be an awesome night, guys. And there's no one else that I'd rather spend it with."

"Hear, hear," everyone else chanted.

"To friendship," Lucas said, raising his voice and waving his drink.

"To friendship!" was the echo, and they all drank.

El took a small sip and licked her lips. It was an odd taste. It was bitter and very fizzy, but as soon as she drank it, an odd and warm feeling spread throughout her body, filling her up and reaching the tips of her fingers and toes, it seemed. It was a very good feeling. It brought a sensation to her head that made her feel like no matter what, everything would always be okay.

It still tasted funny though.

Around her, everyone else seemed to have similar reactions. She wasn't sure if it was a boys thing, but as soon as Dustin took a sip he hooted and fist-pumped the air, and all the other guys yelled out in approval and stood up, waving their cans around. She and Max shared an eye roll. *Boys.*

"Yo, Steve," Lucas exclaimed. "This is good shit, dude!"

"Yeah!" Mike shouted out and took another gulp. He coughed and then seemed to bite back a gag. Everyone laughed.

"You sure it's good for you, Wheeler?" Robin came through the door.

Everyone jumped back, startled by the sudden entry of the high schooler. "Jesus Christ, Robin!" Steve rubbed his hands through her hair. "You could have at least knocked, I think I just shit myself."

"Just beer me," Robin muttered and held up an outstretched hand. "I've had a long day." Steve tossed the can football-style across the living room and she caught it in both hands, and popped the tab and took a few hurried sips.

"Alright, I'm gonna get back to this," Will huffed, stretching his arms above his head and then grabbing the can off the table once again. He put it to his lips.

"Amen, brother," Dustin said and helped himself.

"What do you think, El?" Max asked her, and then took a swig of her own drink.

El raised an eyebrow. What *did* she think of it? "It's good. I like it," she replied honestly with a full smile, helping herself to more.

"Okay, guys!" Dustin yelled. "I think it's time for some shots!"

Everyone yelled out in agreement. It had been a couple of beers for all of them, and they were all feeling a little buzzed. And they were having the *greatest* time of their lives.

Mike leaned back in the comfy couch, right after slamming down his third can on the coffee table. He let out a loud burp.

"Oh, jeez, thanks, Wheeler. Fuckin' hell!" Max roared, and everyone erupted into laughter. Then everyone lost it, even more, when El let out the loudest belch of the night.

"Holy shit, El!" Will screamed, slamming the table with the open palm of his hand. "Any louder and I would have gone deaf!"

"Hey, hey hey! Focus, everyone!" Dustin started slapping the wooden surface aggressively. "We are about to drink the magic elixir that is known as forty-percent Jack Daniel's whiskey."

"Goddamn," Lucas whispered, rubbing his hands together like some kind of evil mastermind unveiling a plan.

"Watch it, 'cause this shit kicks like a shotgun," Dustin showboated.

"Oh, look how tough you are. I thought I was gonna have to call an ambulance for you after you took that first drink, you pussy," Steve jeered.

"Gimme a break, that was the warm-up," he shifted the blame immediately. "This one, it'll be fine, watch me."

Without waiting to get made fun of again, Dustin grabbed all the shot glasses and pulled them toward him, and tipped the bottle to pour a small amount in each glass. Max raised an eyebrow. It wasn't even full.

"C'mon, that's only like, half," Max whined. "Fill them up all the way you pantsy," she said, with a slightly slurred voice.

"Here we go," Dustin announced, stretching his arms out like he was giving a speech. "Designated lightweight over here."

"Oh, fuck off! I'm only joking, I'm fine," she snapped in a much clearer voice. "Just give me the whiskey, punk,"

El leaned closer to Mike and whispered. "What's a lightweight?"

"Oh," Mike replied, looking at her. "That's someone who doesn't weight that much, they get drunk easier. The less you weigh, the less alcohol it takes to get you drunk."

"Oh," she murmured, nodding her head slowly. "It's no wonder Dustin isn't a lightweight. He's probably the biggest one of us here."

Mike snorted. "Yeah, probably," he said, eying the full shot glass that was being handed to him by Dustin. "Thanks, brother," he jerked his head toward Dustin in gratitude. Eying the strange liquid, he creased his brow and lifted the glass up to his nose and sniffed.

His face contorted in disgust and he almost dropped the glass. He gagged and plugged

his nose. "Jesus Christ!" He looked at Dustin with a mix of shock and admiration. "You drank this?!"

"Hell's yeah," Dustin smirked. He poured El's glass.

"El, you sure you wanna drink this?" Mike asked her, turning to look at her deep brown eyes. God, his semi-drunk state, she was looking especially appealing tonight. And to think that later in that night they would probably be sharing a bed to sleep...

Holy shit, that was enough to make his teenage mind burst.

El took a whiff of the liquid, and blew a quick burst of air out of her nose and coughed. "I mean," she began. "Dustin drank it. That probably means I can drink it, too," she reasoned, with a shrug. And without a second thought, she tipped her head back and stomached the entire shot.

"Holy shit!" Mike laughed, and everyone started cheering loudly.

"God damn!" Steve put his hands on his hip. "She took that better than you, Dustin."

"Shut up and pass the bottle, jackass," Dustin grumbled. "I'll show you guys."

"Okay, hit me as well," Mike butted in, along with everyone else as they simultaneously placed their glasses on the table, giving Steve and Robin impatient stares.

Meanwhile, El was trying to ignore that awful taste in her mouth... it felt like it was on fire. But the sensation in her body and mind, and the warmth in her gut, it was amazing. It made her want to laugh and have fun and not think about anything and just lie down and not give a shit about anything in the world, ever. And so she found herself placing her glass alongside the rest of them when they were all refilling their glasses.

"Hey," she felt a tickle of Mike's breath near her ear. She looked to her side to meet his thoughtful eyes. "Make sure you watch yourself okay? If you feel like you want to stop, or can't keep going, just... you can, okay?"

El nodded. "Okay, don't worry," she assured him, taking his hand in hers. "I won't have too much, I promise."

She was suddenly caught up in the moment of staring into his pupils,

El felt a familiar urge stirring in her stomach. The urge that was telling her to lunge forward and ravish his neck and lips, but no. Not yet. Maybe later, in the night, when they had the guest bed all to themselves...

Control your thoughts, El.

"Hello? Earth to El and Mike? You guys off in your own world right now, or what?"

Mike whirled his head back to the table, where he was getting stared at expectantly by everyone else in the room. He coughed. "What?"

"Pick up the damn glass! This is the first group shot of the night."

"Group shot?"

"We're having a shot. As a group, all together. Hence the name, gro-"

"Okay, Jesus! Somebody count down or something."

And then everyone started counting down together.

"Five!"

"Four!"

"Three!"

"Two!"

"One!"

And they drank.

I could go for some Jack Daniels with my buddies right about now. As always thank you so much for your continued support, guys! It means the world to me. Let me know too what you thought of this chapter. Take it easy!

-OM

20. Chapter 20

Welcome back everyone, part 2 of Steve's night is out. I tried to get this chapter out as quick as possible, but I can't make any promises for when the next chapter will be out. I haven't even started it yet, but I think I know where I want it to go. Prepare for some drama ahead, folks.

Guest: I never realized though of any actual games... I guess that might be another chapter? I'm not sure if I will do this idea again, maybe in the future. This idea is more of way to transition into a bigger even, but you'll see that later.

Luna0603: I hope your hopes are quenched with this chapter then :) Btw, I'm loving you work with "Tied Together With A Smile"!

Vader115: Thank you!

Guest 2: I definitely see what you mean. Guess we will have to find out soon :)

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: Damn right I did :) hope you like this chapter too!

"NEVER ENDING STORRRR-YYYYYYY!" everyone screamed around the table, waving cans of beer and shot glasses high in the sky, living in the greatest moment of the summer so far, for all of them. Even Dustin was singing when normally he would be telling them all to shut up.

But Dustin was too drunk to care. He sprang out of his seat and almost fell over, stumbling toward the back of the room.

"Dustin, where the fuck you goin'?" Lucas asked with slurred words. "We're all tryna sing right now, and yer killin' it! The hell, man?"

"No, man, you don't understand what I'm doing here, man, just listen, man..." he droned, swaying around and trying to stay on his two feet. "You guys are all singing it wrong, it goes like, like, like, like *this*..."

He burped loudly and El shrieked with laughter, which startled Mike and made him drop his can. "Son of a bitch!" he yelled, and picked up the can. "Oh, thank God, it was empty."

"Sorry, Mikey," El giggled, leaning onto his shoulder clumsily and eying his lips. "I wanna kiss you," she slurred. Puckering her lips in a very exaggerated manner, she started making kissing sounds. Everyone started to laugh, turning their attention away from Dustin.

"Hey! Over you here, you bitches..." Dustin yelled, and stuck an arm to brace himself against the wall. From there he started to sing *Never Ending Story*, but he was skipping a bunch of the words and lines, and generally making little sense at all.

Will stared at his friend, grinning like a wild fool. He had not had this much fun in the entire last year. He had been skeptical about this whole thing at first, but his sides were sore from laughing so much, and his cheeks hurt from the smiling. His head was buzzing and his heart was fluttering with an overwhelming sense of joy, calmness, happiness... peace.

That was something that he had not felt in all of its meaning for so long. He was with all of his friends, having not a care in the world. Steve had been watching their intake for the entire evening, and he had made sure that they had not had so much that they would be vomiting, so he had peace of mind that he would be well and healthy the next morning.

But he was impaired enough to be howling with laughter along with everyone else in the room, talking and telling jokes, singing, and enjoying that oh-so-wonderful sense of companionship and friendship. He glanced at the clock hanging on the wall at the other side of the room and noticed the time was much later than he had even thought: nearly two o'clock in the morning.

"Hey, guys, it's getting pretty late," he announced, standing up wobbly. "I think I might call it a night."

"Alright, go lie down," Steve signaled over to one of the open doors in the corner of the room. "There's a couch there, it's nice to sleep on."

"We'll wake you up when we have the fireworks set up," Robin added, with a mischievous grin. Everyone else in the room snapped to attention when they heard the word 'fireworks.'

"Fireworks? What fireworks? Is it Satan's Baby?" Lucas started rambing excitedly.

"Sounds like Lucas's got a boner from Satan's Baby," Mike jibed, taking another small sip from the nearly empty bottle of whiskey on the table. He had grown more accustomed to the taste of it, but he still had to bite back a shudder of disgust, he didn't want to look like a pussy in front of everyone else.

How did something so good taste so bad?

"I didn't know you brought fireworks, Robin," Steve mumbled, scratching the back of his neck in contemplation. "I don't know if it's a good idea to set them off at this time of night."

"Oh, come on! Loosen up!" Robin waved off his obvious concern dismissively with an exaggerated shake of her head. "The famous Steve 'the Hair' Harrington is afraid of some lil' ol' fireworks?" she asked him in a baby voice.

"Hey, shut the fuck up," Steve retorted. "I've already had the police up my ass once in the last few years, I don't want a noise complaint sending them all over here and then finding a bunch of drunk fourteen-year-olds."

"Oh, come on, Steve," Dustin pleaded and whined, crashing to the ground in front of him on his knees and started bowing down over and over again as if he was some sort of ancient Egyptian pharaoh. "We promise to do thy bidding for the rest of eternity."

Steve bit his lip and shook his head, fighting back a growing grin at how ridiculous this kid was behaving. What is this a good idea?

"I mean, Steve," Lucas entered the conversation. "You *do* live in the middle of a forest. It'll probably be pretty quiet. And the chances of you starting a forest fire are *really* low, it rained last night and everything is still wet."

That was a good point. Steve was also surprised at how well Lucas was composing himself after the last couple of hours of drinking. "You talk pretty well for a drunk guy, dude," Steve commented, sipping from his own can.

Lucas shrugged. "I don't know. I definitely feel it. I guess I'm able to talk semi-decently, at least. Which is more than I can say for Dustin," he snorted, glancing over at his unstable friend, who was currently sprawled out on the floor with his belly up, arms and legs splayed.

"I'm just resting my legs, *Lucas*," he replied his voice heavy with sarcasm.

The pair continued to bicker as Steve and Robin discussed the logistics of the firework idea. Mike watched his two friends with amusement. He always enjoyed watching the two of them argue about the most pointless things, and out of the entire Party, they did it the most.

However, he was completely oblivious to the fact that the girl beside him had been eyeing him hungrily for the past three straight minutes. And the alcohol was stirring her sexual desire strongly, and she could feel the arousal building up in every corner of her body. An idea came to her mind, so she collected her voice and spoke out to get Steve's attention.

"Steve, is it okay if Mike and I hang out in the guest bedroom until the fireworks get started up? If we are still doing that?"

Mike coughed on his drink, and he could feel his cheeks warming up at El's words. He was about to interject but realized that no one had even heard but Robin and El. Dustin and Lucas were on the ground wrestling at this point, and Max and Will were sitting on the other couch having, what seemed like a civilized conversation.

Steve cut off his words abruptly to stare at the two of them. He glanced at Mike, who was turning a beet shade of red and avoiding his eyes, and El, who was staring at him, innocently and expectantly. He thought about it. They were fourteen. He lost his virginity when he was fourteen. They were very invested in one other, clearly. Both of them were responsible. And what was the most that was going to

happen?

"Yeah, sure, go for it," he shrugged and turned away to resume his talk with Robin, like he had not even given it a second thought. El's face beamed, and she grabbed her boyfriend by the hand and pulled him off the couch. Mike's face was still burning up, he could feel it, but now he was feeling something else stirring up inside him. His heart started to pound with excitement, given how his time had been with El the last time they were alone in a bed together. Fuck, it had been amazing. And now they were running toward the room giggling like children, for both of them knew what was going to happen as soon as the door closed behind them.

El set her foot through the doorway and turned around to face Mike, and no sooner had he slammed the door behind him and thrown himself into her, attacking his mouth with hers. As soon as contact was made there was a breathy and low groan that escaped him, and the friction between their bodies as they furiously made out only made the fire burn hotter.

A sudden animalistic surge rushed through his veins, and as if on instinct, he grabbed El's hips tightly and whirled them around so that she was backed up against the wall. He took his hand and placed it on her right thigh and hiked it up so that it was resting on his hip, and she suddenly realized what was happening. Before she could react, she was being lifted up, and then slammed between the wall and the boy that was holding her. Not able to resist, she moaned and opened her lips to allow their tongues to mesh together.

Both of them were panting at this point, hearts pounding and blood rushing. She was getting squished even harder against the hard surface behind her, and he could feel her breasts touching his chest, and his stiff penis rubbing against her thigh, and the anticipation within her that made her feel like she was about to explode. She did not know what was going to happen, but whatever it was she was ready for it.

Mike turned his attention to her neck, and latched his mouth around the skin and sucked

impossibly hard, and El knew it was going to leave a clear mark, but

she didn't even care at this point. She could barely get out words to tell him what she wanted. "Mike," she gasped. "Bed..."

Not having to be told twice, Mike whirled around, still holding her in his arms, and then fell onto the bed loudly, and the mattress gave a loud creak in protest. The weight of Mike bore down on El's petite frame, but she didn't mind in the slightest. She enjoyed being so close to him.

She was eager for more skin-on-skin contact, and her hands found their mark at the bottom of Mike's baggy sweatshirt, and she inched it up his torso frenetically. As soon as it reached his armpits, he rose up and peeled off the layer of clothing, exposing his bare chest to her. Leaning back down, their mouths met hungrily again, already starving from being apart for just a few seconds. In the meantime, El was unbuttoning the plaid shirt that she was wearing, a hand-me-down from Hopper that she had chosen to wear for this night.

Mike let some of his weight off El just long enough for her to undo the last button, but after realizing that she was lying on her back, he realized that a change in their position would have to be made for her to get it off. "Come here," he almost growled, and she shivered at the tone of his voice, all husky and dominant and sexy. He rolled over and pulled El with him so that now he was the one lying flat on the bed and she was on top.

El finished peeling off the shirt that was keeping her skin covered, and tossed it aside without caring where it ended up. When she looked back down at Mike, she saw that his eyes had traveled down to her chest, his pupils blown and his mouth slightly agape. His expression said a thousand words, he did not have to even speak for her to know exactly what he was thinking.

"El," he murmured, his eyes darting up to look deep into hers.

Before even replying, he had grabbed her by her biceps and yanked her down to him, and their mouths were moving against one another again, both of them in equal heaven. Parting his lips a little bit more, Mike stroked his tongue along the kiss, waiting to be let in. El complied with a sigh, and the sensation of the intensifying kiss drove her to start swaying her hips back and forth against her boyfriend's

body.

It felt so good when she did that, and with his eyes closed, Mike could almost imagine what it would feel like to have no barriers in between them, nothing but skin on skin, the heat from both of them radiating from their bodies and meeting in the middle. His erection was raging at this point, but it didn't even matter because with each passing second El was rubbing herself against it harder. He started to run his hands up and down her smooth back, so warm and so soft. Up and down, left and right, around and around along the canvas of her beautiful skin that he could still see through closed eyes.

El's soft moans were getting louder and louder, and they were turning him so much. His boner was still aching, but he wasn't going to make any move to take his pants off right now; they were both intoxicated and he wasn't sure if El was ready, and he wasn't going to ask if she was in her current state. Even though he was questioning boundaries, he found himself moving his hands toward her chest, and he was acutely aware of how close he was getting to finding his mark on her breasts, like they had that one night in her bed. He was desperate to feel them again, even if it was just through her bra.

He found the soft mounds of flesh and gave them a firm squeeze and El recoiled from the kiss for a millisecond with a gasp, before leaning straight back in and resuming what she was doing. She whispered against his lips. "Take it off."

"Are you sure?" he whispered back in between scorching kisses.

"If you don't, I will," she purred back, driving her hips into his again once with vigor, enticing him to do as she said. His heart skipped a beat, and his gut flipped. Holy shit, it was actually going to happen tonight. He was going to feel and see her naked tits.

Pulling her back in, he kissed her hard, and moved his hands toward the clasp at the center of her back. He pulled it apart, and he knew he had succeeded when he felt the straps loosen in his hands.

El shrugged her shoulders down and allowed Mike to gingerly pull it off without separating from their kiss. The bra was strewn on the floor, along with their shirts that long since been removed. And as

soon as that happened, his hands flew to her chest, and nothing could have prepared him for what they were like.

They were so soft and round, and they were firm but at the same time seemed to mold under his touch, like two pillows that were made in heaven. He fondled them more aggressively and kneaded them like a cat on a carpeted floor. When he brushed his fingers over her taut nipples, she moaned loudly into his mouth. He did it again, and gave them even a tentative roll in his fingers.

"Mike," she whispered urgently through desperate pants, pulling away from this kiss momentarily, but just by an inch, and Mike could still feel her warm breath against his lips.

"What is it?" Mike asked, rubbing his hand through her severely tangled hair that had been caused by past intense couple moments. She opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it again, as if she was having trouble finding the right words to say. "Is something wrong?" he pressed.

But without another word, she grabbed him by the back of his head with power and meaning. She rolled off his chest and onto her back, the comforter feeling nice against her bare body. With Mike's head in her grasp, he followed her movements and realized that she was guiding his face to those delicious tits.

Fuck, they looked so nice.

They were perfectly symmetrical, and there was ample enough cleavage for him to just bury his face in if he wanted to. Her nipples were swollen and pink and just seemed to be in the perfect place in relation to the rest of her chest. They didn't sag at all, they were shapely and big enough to get his hands full as he grabbed them both.

"Mike, please," she begged, knowing what she wanted. Not having to be asked twice, Mike carried on. But he wanted to tease her a little bit, make her want it so bad she was shaking. He massaged her left breast carefully, still wanting to build tension. He started kissing the other one, all around it, working his way closer and closer to her nipple as he did so.

The closer he got, the more her chest heaved. She struggled to keep her vocalizations from coming out, because if she did she knew that people would know what they were doing. But it just felt so good. And then he placed a single kiss right on her nipple and she gasped. The area was so sensitive and his mouth was so soft and warm and welcoming. But it was only there for a second, and then it was gone again.

"Mike, why did you-"

"Shhh," he whispered, his voice so thick with lust it made her shiver. He brought his head back down and let his tongue slide out, and dragged it all the way across her chest from one nipple to the other, leaving a hot trail of saliva along her tits.

"Oh fuck, Mike," she moaned softly. "That feels so good."

"Mm-hm," he hummed, and swiped his tongue along the entirety of her breast, occasionally sucking on the skin and making suction sounds as he let go of the flesh and relocated. It was heaven for El. She had no idea if it could get any better until he closed his lips around her nipple.

She wasn't even able to get out a coherent thought, so she just ended up hissing at the feeling and furiously grabbing the back of his head and tangling her fingers into his copious amounts of black hair, and she stroked it ferociously. He sucked harder, and at the same time attacking the nub with his tongue.

He moved to the side, sucking on the flesh beside the nipple, and El knew that he was trying to leave a hickey. She wanted him to, she wanted him to mark her so that every time she got changed in the morning and evening she would see those sexy bruises on her tits and think of this moment, watching his face buried into her chest and licking and sucking and kissing everywhere.

"Harder," she keened. And he complied, sucking on her tit as hard as he could so much that it almost hurt, but it felt so good at the same time, and she knew that it was going to be practically purple, but that would be even better.

He moved over to the next breast, and replaced his former hold on the other one with his hand, grabbing and squeezing it firmly. He did the same thing to the next one, which felt even more exhilarating.

They had been at it for a few more minutes before a pounding came at the door. "Hey, guys, you still in there?" It was Steve.

"Fuck!" Mike cursed under his breath and darted off El and toward the side of the bed

where their clothes were located. He tossed the bra and shirt over to El and slipped on his own. "Yeah, we're okay, Steve," he called back out. "Are we still doing the fireworks?"

"Yeah, we got them set up, come out when you're ready," he yelled back. They heard footsteps walking away from the room, and they exchanged confused glances. How was he so relaxed about the fact that there were two horny teens in a bedroom with the door closed alone.

"Steve is a lot more relaxed than I thought he would be," Mike commented. "I wish more

parents were like him."

"Yes," replied El, thinking back to Hopper's strict rules back during her time in the cabin. After fixing themselves up and smoothing out their ruffled hair, they walked into the living room to meet the rest of the Party. When they entered, everyone looked at them and smirked.

"You're shirt's inside-out, Michael," Max pointed out, completely poker-faced. Everyone else burst out laughing, and Mike turned beat red.

"Okay, shut up guys," he complained. "I bet you and Lucas get up to shit all the time, and I don't give you any shit."

"Yeah, but when we *do* do shit, it's not in the room next to our friends, and we don't come out with our clothes inside out."

El blushed, but couldn't hide her smile. She knew that her friends were just teasing, so it didn't bother her.

"Alright guys, let's go out and watch some of the fireworks, they're all set up," Robin announced and led the rest of the group into the patio where they saw Steve fiddling with a lighter. He whacked it twice against his palm, and tried again, but this time it ignited. The bright orange flame lit up his face, and he looked at the younger teens with a smile.

"You guys ready?"

Alright guys, that's it for this chapter. As always, leave the reviews. They motivate me to plow through these chapters, and knowing that you guys like what I'm doing is very gratifying. Thanks for the support, and take it easy :)

21. Chapter 21

Alright guys, I'm back. Sorry about the wait for this one, school is just kicking my ass right now. I finished this chapter during my physics class (we have a sub), and I didn't really proofread this too much. I got a review asking about the next chapter, and I had to get something out. This one's a little short, but I prefer to keep content coming, even if it's small. I'd rather not wait for a month and then get a chapter of like 10000 words. So anywhere, here you guys go. I hope you enjoy :)

Luna0605: Thanks! I just read chapter 8 of Tied Together With A Smile. You're a brilliant writer.

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: Thank you so much! I hope you enjoy this chapter too, it's a doozy.

Vader115: Thank you! And here you go, if it hadn't been for you, this wouldn't be coming out today, lmao.

A streak of colour dashed from the ground and into the sky with astounding speed and exploded into a shower of red and orange sparks, illuminating the night sky like a heavenly campfire up above. Steve whooped and the rest of the party laughed and cheered, gazing upward and lost in the magical sight.

"It's just like Starcourt, except without that bitch-ass Mindflayer!" Lucas yelled out.

Everyone agreed with that statement in their minds, but no one bothered answering because then another jet of light shot up in the stars and exploded with a boom.

"Are you sure the police won't come or anything?" Robin whispered over to Steve.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," he replied, looking over at his lighter. "Worst-case-scenario, we'll

just tell the kids to hide inside and they'll give us a slap on the wrist."

Robin nodded and looked back up, turning her attention to the spectacle overhead.

El was standing behind the rest of the Party along with Mike, their hands latched together. Every single time one of the projectiles blew up, she tensed up and gave his hand a hard squeeze, and each time she got a comforting squeeze back. She knew that he didn't mind. It was hard not to admit that the sight of it was beautiful; the way the different hues of light blended and mixed; the shadows that it casted upon them; how the forest canopy flashed. And when there was no Mindflyer trying to eat her, it was a breath-taking thing to look at.

But there was a sort of bittersweetness to it all; she was standing before these fireworks with everyone who she cared about. But in the back of her mind, she kept getting these flashbacks to that horrible night. However, she was able to push those flashbacks behind. Being with everyone gave her strength to stand through it all. And she knew that as long as her friends had her back, she would be able to get through anything, no matter what.

"What do you think of the fireworks, El?" El turned to her right and saw Mike staring right back into her eyes. He had beautiful eyes. She always got lost in them if she gazed into them long enough.

"They're nice," she replied honestly, tearing away from his face just for a moment before watching another burst in the sky. She turned back to look at him, and saw that his eyes had never left her face. He smiled and leaned down, giving her a single peck on the lips; it felt teasing, as if she was meant to feel like she wanted more.

Which she did.

"Have you ever seen fireworks before, El?" Dustin's voice sounded faint through the noise of the works, but she still heard him.

"No, I haven't," she answered. "Well, besides at the mall," she clarified.

"They're really pretty, aren't they? They're like Suzie," he laughed, his words meshing together slightly. El could tell that he was still decently drunk, as was the rest of the group. But Mike and herself

had sobered up a decent amount since their time alone just under half an hour ago.

She recalled a conversation that she had had with Hopper during her time in the cabin, before Mike came back in her life. It was New Year's and the two of them were doing something relaxing; she couldn't remember exactly what, but it was most likely some kind of board game. They had played lots of those.

Then a loud boom had interrupted the tranquil silence of their evening, and she had been terrified. Hopper barely had any reaction toward the sound until he saw that she had started crying. When he saw what was happening, he had almost dropped his cutlery and reached across the table to grab her small hand with his large, rough fingers. "Kid? What's wrong?"

She sniffed. "The noises," she whispered unsurely. "What are they?"

"Noises?" Hopper repeated, confused. Then he understood and nodded, blowing air out of his mouth. "Those are, uh... those are fireworks, kid."

"Fire...fire-works?"

"Yeah, they're these colourful rocket thingies you shoot in the sky and they explode and look really pretty. People use them when they're celebrating something."

"Ce-le-brate?"

"Yeah, celebrate. Like, uh... it's a special day today, and they're having fun because of it. It's New Year's."

"What's that?"

"You know the calendar on the fridge?" He pointed toward the fridge door and El saw the piece of paper pinned by a magnet to the door. She nodded.

"Well, the calendar has three-hundred-and-sixty-five days on it. When all those days pass, a new year starts. It used to be 1983. It's going to be 1984 tomorrow."

El simply nodded in response. "And the next year will be 1985. Each time it goes up," Hopper continued. "You know that, right? You've seen it in your math work."

"Yes."

They continued to sit in silence, the only noise being the occasional echoes of the fireworks from town square from across town.

"Maybe some time we can see some New Year's fireworks together. Maybe in a year or two I'll take you there."

El looked up, looking almost frightened. The idea of being so close to all that loud noise gave her an uneasy feeling. Hopper seemed to pick up on this and reached across the table to brush her knuckles with his fingertips reassuringly. "They're not scary. They're really cool, actually. You'll see, when I take you to see them some time."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"El? Are you okay?"

Her mind flashed back to her current position, on the patio of Steve's house. Looking over, she saw Mike looking back at her expectantly and concerned. "Yes, I was just thinking about something."

Mike nodded, and pulled her closer to him by wrapping his arm around her shoulders. She sighed and smiled, snuggling closer to his warm body and allowing his larger frame to envelope hers. Looking up at the sky, she realized that right now, everything was perfect.

"Hopper told me about fireworks a long time ago," she spoke aloud, to no one in particular. "He told me that one day, he would take me to see the one's on New Year's."

"Yeah, they're really nice," Max agreed. "I saw them last year."

Lucas looked confused. "With who?"

"Just myself," she replied. "I didn't really want to go with anyone

back then." Max and Lucas then proceeded to get caught up in a conversation about fireworks and New Year's. El tuned them out and watched as Steve lit up the last one in the box and flew up, exploded, and then shimmered away magically.

"Well," Steve announced. "That was the last one. Let's pray no police show up." Everyone laughed at his joke, which might not have even been a joke, but all of them were sailing on a sea of liquor and happiness, and it was pure bliss to not have to worry about anything.

El became saddened after the last firework. She had really enjoyed watching them. But looking on the bright side, she realized that now she had an entire evening of being alone in a bed with Mike.

That was an appetizing thought.

But her disappointment from the fireworks ending must have shown on her face a little bit too much then she wanted, because then Dustin spoke. "Hey, don' look too glum, El," he cracked. "Maybe one day we'll find Hopper n' he can take you t'see those New Year's fireworks."

Mike choked on his breath. Dustin was drunk. And now he was about to completely reveal the truth about what happened with Hopper, and more importantly, about how he lied to her. He had no idea what he saw saying, probably. And if he did know what he was saying, then there was going to be an even bigger problem.

El looked at Dustin incredulously. Dustin was about to open his mouth again but Mike swooped in to try to save the situation. "Dustin!" he interrupted loudly. "What are you talking about? Stop talking about Hopper, I don't want-"

"No, whattaya talkin' about?" Dustin slurred, and only then did Mike realize that he was holding the entire bottle of whiskey in his hand. *Oh, Jesus.* "Hopper is still alive! You jus' told me not to tell El!"

Shit, shit, shit, shit! Mike left El's side and strode over to where Dustin was standing and leaned in close to him so he could whisper. "Dustin, shut the *fuck* up, man," he growled. He was too scared to look back at El, who he knew was probably already starting to piece together the

puzzle.

Dustin blew a gust of air out of his mouth and into Mike's face, and he could smell the strong tang of the alcohol on his breath. "Mike, be quiet," he stumbled over his words, trying to nudge Mike away.

"Mike?" A small voice entered Mike's ear from behind him. He already knew what was coming, and he squeezed his eyes shut and gulped. He turned around slowly to look at El, and realized that everyone else in the group was staring at the two of them, not daring to say a word. His heart started to pound on his chest when he saw the hurt and angry look in El's eyes, the look he had seen many times before, but not usually directed at him.

"What is Dustin talking about?" she asked firmly, not breaking her intent stare, not even blinking. "Friends don't lie."

Mike licked his lips. What choice did he have? He could either confess now, and maybe she would even understand. Or he could dig himself even further down the rabbit hole. But that would just mean that when she *did* find out, it would be even worse. And Dustin was still standing beside him, and there was no way of knowing that if he did lie again, if he would just catch it and tell El the truth. It would probably be better if it came from anyway, not from one of his friends. Fuck!

"Uhhh," he began, swaying back and forth on his tippy toes. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK! "There...might be a chance that Hopper is still alive. And... we found out from Will a while ago about it. His Mom never saw his body. So... there's a chance... a *chance*... that he might still be alive. We think. Maybe somewhere in Russia."

El was silent. Mike could not tell if she was upset or angry, so he chose to continue. "When Will told us, we didn't know if we should tell you about it or not. Some of us thought that you should know because...well, he was your Dad and stuff, and that you deserved to know. But some of us thought that it would be easier if we didn't tell you so that... so you could move on easier.

"And Dustin kinda spilled the beans here," he laughed nervously, hoping to draw at least a tiny reaction from El, but there was none.

His heart continued to beat furiously in his rib cage, so hard that he thought he might pass out. "But, um... Dustin thinks that he could be alive somewhere, maybe some Russian prison or something, but.. We don't know. If he's dead. Or not."

He swallowed heavily, allowing El to digest what she had just been told. Her face was still expressionless, and with each passing millisecond Mike was getting more and more tense to the point that he was scrunching his toes together in his shoes. It was unbearable. She just had to say something, anything. Had she even been listening?

Her eyes were no longer focused on him, they were just simply glazed over and she was now just gazing into thin air. "El?" he asked, almost in a whisper. "Are you okay?" His question was met with more silence. It was killing him. He noticed that the rest of the group was starting to slowly back away, as if they were afraid of El suddenly exploding with them close to her. Mike took a few slow steps toward El, trying to get closer. She was looking at the floor now. It was impossible to read what she was feeling. What was she feeling? Was she feeling anything? What was wrong?

"El?" Mike reached a hand out to touch her but she quickly took a step back. *No. No, no, no no no no...* "El?" he repeated taking another step closer, but she took another step back. The situation was slipping through his fingers like grains of sand. He tried to hug her but El reached up and pushed his arms away, still not meeting his eye. Her lip was shaking and her eyes were starting to tear up.

Holy shit, was she really that upset? What was going on? He was getting more and more terrified by the second. He wasn't going to lose her again, not like this. Not because of some stupid lie. She opened her mouth. "I..." she trailed off, not finishing the sentence.

"El, please-"

"No," she said quietly, starting to walk away.

"El, I can explain-"

"Go away."

"There was a reason, I just thought-"

"NO!" she screamed, her voice ripping through the cool forest air like a machete. "Leave me alone!" She was crying now, completely and utterly.

And with that, she took off, running into the woods.

Alright guys, what do you think? Things are gonna get a little bit bumpy as we approach the whole moving plot line etc. Again, the reviews are always greatly appreciated. They push me to get this stuff done for you quicker, so if you like what you're reading, please let me know! I love all you guys. Take it easy :)

22. Chapter 22

Hey guys, I'm back. I'm really sorry about the long wait, school has been crazy ever since I posted the last chapter. But I worked really hard to finish all the homework I had yesterday, so I'm focusing on writing for the rest of the weekend. I might be able to get the next chapter out soon. Let me know how badly you want it in the reviews :)

Also, I'd like to give you guys a brief heads-up about this chapter; it's pretty intense and there's a lot of upsetting things going on. One of the things that I realized about the last episode of S3 was how awkward Mike and El were together. Something had happened since Starcourt and when they left, and a whole bunch of people had thought of reasons why. This is my take on why they were awkward, or at least the beginning of it. We're kind of approaching the end of this "part" of the story. After the move, there's a whole new platform for me to work with, which I'm really excited about. As I've said, I plan to be invested in this story for the long run, so make sure to drop a follow!

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: I don't think she is...

Guest: Thank you so much! I'm glad your enjoying it. Let me know what you think of this chapter!

HarleyGrove: Thank you! Yeah, it was pretty out of the blue, wasn't it?

Vader115: Yup :(

Guest: Don't worry, I assure you it will end well for them.

Guest: Let's see...

Luna0605: I guess we will see about when Joyce tells El about the move. I'm still thinking about how I want to play that. I hope you stick around to see it!

Julliak: Yeah... let's see how he does in this chapter!

As soon as El turned away from Mike was already moving toward her even faster than he was before. And then she started to run, quickly putting one foot in front of the other and not looking back. On instinct, like a magnet in his heart was pulling him, he took off as well. He ignored the calls and protests from his friends telling him to stop and leave her alone, or to give her space. No, he wouldn't do that. He had to get to El and tell her what was going on. He had to tell that the lie he told was something that he did for her own good. It was something he did so he wouldn't have to see her in constant pain for the rest of her life, waiting for Hopper to return when he never would.

But he knew that El would not be so reasonable; she was brimming with emotion, he knew that. And he knew that she was fuming at him right now for lying. He also knew that above all, she was a woman. And women operate based on emotions, not logic. But hopefully he could make her see his logic for doing what he did.

El was surprisingly fast, and as they reached the woods, Mike was having a hard time keeping up. But as soon as they reached denser trees, he was proven to be the faster runner. El's still healing leg might have helped, too.

"El!" he called out in desperation as he started to close the distance. "El, wait!" She still didn't stop, and kept trying to maintain the gap in between them. "El, please, wait up!" He finally caught up with her and grabbed her shoulders. She whirled around and did something that he never thought she would ever do in a million years.

She slapped him. *Hard.*

His heart stung more than the side of his face. Shock spread through his entire body. As he moved his hand up to feel the place where his skin was throbbing, he looked at her face and felt sick to his stomach. Her eyes were red and puffy, and there were tears splashed all over her eyelids and cheeks. Her mouth seemed to be frozen in something between a scowl and an expression that he couldn't even put his finger on; a face of pure sadness and anger and betrayal. It was gut wrenching.

"El, I..."

"Shut up, Mike," she spat at him, and turned around again.

"I can explain, I was just-"

"*No!*" she screamed at him, turning on her heel to look him dead in the eye. "You always said friends don't lie. But you keep *lying!*"

"But I only lied because-"

"You lied about your nana in July. You said that you would never lie again. But you *did!* You lied *again!*"

"But-"

"I don't care why! You lied! Friends don't lie! Boyfriends don't lie! Girlfriends don't lie! I

never lie to you!" Her voice was breaking, she could no longer fight the tears that were streaming down her face. She was gasping for air.

"W-why would you lie about H-H-Hopper? Why would you not tell me that my d-dad could be alive? All this time I thought he was dead!" she yelled, her voice catching in her throat over and over again.

"Because I thought that you would get past him sooner! I didn't want to see you in pain for longer than I had to? Don't you understand? If you had thought he was alive, you'd spend the rest of your life waiting for him to come back when he never will!"

El recoiled like she had struck. He suddenly realized what he had said. He immediately started back pedaling. "El, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that.."

"Why would it be so bad if I *did* spend the rest of my life waiting for him?! Just knowing that he might be alive gives me at least some hope! All I've felt for the whole summer is just a pit in my stomach that no one else can fill!"

"What are you talking about!?" Mike yelled back. He was growing frustrated. Why was El behaving so irrationally? Could she not see the sense in his actions. And she had fucking *hit* him! What the fuck

was wrong with her? "You've been fine!"

"And how the fuck would you know!? All you've been trying to do is have sex with me! At least Hopper cared! At least Hopper didn't *lie*!"

"He lied to you about everything! He was the one who made me lie to you in the first place!" Mike screamed back, tears clouding his vision and anger fury (with both El and himself) clouding his mind. He felt like he was past the point of getting her to calm down, and right now he was trying to defend himself, because it was clear that she was now being irrational. And the fact that she was saying all these things to him made him feel like there was an icicle being driven straight through his soul. How was he being compared to Hopper right now, after he went out of his way to break them up? Why was she being so mad at him for something as small as a little white lie?

"Maybe he realized what a shitty person you are!" El shrieked in rage. "Maybe he wanted me to spend some time with other people, like Max!"

"Okay, then go spend some more fucking time with Max!" Mike yelled throwing his arms

up in the air. "Just get out of my face!" He was panting, adrenaline firing through his body. He had never been more angry in his life. His throat was burning, having been ripped raw from his shouting. He was sure that every animal in the entire forest was running away from their position.

El stared back at him, her eyes wet and chest heaving equally as hard as Mike's. The look in her eyes was something he had never seen before. If she still had her powers, he was positive that she would have used them to throw him against a tree or something by now. But fortunately, that would not be the case. After staring at him for a few more moments, he she turned around without a word and walked away quickly.

Mike watched her beautiful figure slowly dissipate into the shadows until he could no longer see her. He waited until she was out of immediate earshot, and that's when he let go. The lump in his throat that was so large it felt like he could have vomited finally erupted

and he collapsed to his knees. All the pent up anger and helplessness and frustration and sadness was released in an instant with a blood-curdling scream that made it feel like his vocal cords were being shredded. It was a cry of pure pain and rage. Rage at Dustin for getting drunk like some fucking alcoholic and blabbering to El about Hopper; rage at El for being so unreasonable and slapping him and treating him so poorly; and most of all, rage with himself for lying. For not chasing after El, for not trying harder to convince her that it wasn't his fault. And now the girl that he loved more than anything was walking out of his life. Except this time it was not because of Hopper, or anyone else. It was because of him. Because of her.

This truly felt like the end of what they had. And all he felt was just a sinking feeling of despair that incomparable to anything he had ever felt before. He felt the tears run down his cheeks and watched them fall onto the dry summer forest floor. What was he going to do? Was he going to go back to Steve's? Was he going to go home? Was he going to go to the Byers'? He did not know.

With a clenched jaw and bared teeth, he flung himself up from his knees and strided toward a tree. He stared at it, his vision seeming to be flashing red, sirens in his mind wailing. He let out another savage yell and punched the tree as hard as he could. He barely felt a thing. But he felt his skin split open, and he could now feel a warm, sticky wetness trickling in between his fingers and knuckles.

Pacing back and forth, he made up his mind about what to do.

He turned back to the direction that he had come from and started to walk quickly toward Steve's house. He wiped his eyes furiously, he did not want to look like some kind of pussy in front of all the rest of his friends. The only person that he felt comfortable to cry like this in front of was El. And thinking about crying in front of El just made him more angry, and once again his heart started to pound in his ribcage, which seemed to be in sync with the involuntary contractions of his fists.

The Harrington house came into view, the lights on the patio illuminating the edge of the forest. As he got closer, he was able to make out the rest of his friends are still standing by the pool, anxiously looking in his general direction, with arms crossed or over

their heads in worry. He pushed his way through some low-hanging branches and made himself visible to the rest of the Party. Steve was the first to notice him, and he immediately started to make his way over to the disheveled looking boy.

Concern flashed across his face when he saw Mike. His eyes were puffy and bloodshot, and his hands were balled into fists so tight his knuckles were turning white. And speaking of knuckles, one of them looked fucked up pretty good; it looked like he was going to need stitches.

"Jesus Christ, Mike, what happened?" Steve asked, his voice laced with worry. This was *not* how this night was supposed to go. Mike ignored his question and continued his pace toward his target. Steve ignored it and continued talking while walking beside him. "It looks like you might need some ice or something for that hand, yeah? Want me to get you some? I'm gonna go get you some." Without waiting for a reply, he darted back into the house, tripping slightly on his way up the short flight of stars.

As he got closer to the center of the deck, his eyes focused on one thing. The voices of his friends all got drowned out, as if he was hearing them from underwater. His face bent itself into a snarl and without hesitation, he reeled back and swung his closed, bloodied fist right into the face of Dustin.

It was a good punch, he had to admit. There was a lot more give than when he had hit the tree. Except this time he had felt a lot more pain because he had already hit a tree, but he just simply winced and ignored it. He had caught him right in the jaw; he had never been in a fight before, but he knew there was a nerve there that, if hit, would send a person straight to the ground. (He read that in a book his Mom had gotten him when he was younger so that he could defend himself from bullies like Troy.)

And like the book had said, Dustin slumped over and fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes. He fell back and landed on his back looking dazed and nearly unconscious, his head tilting back swaying side to side. Mike was still flaming with anger, and was about to get on top of him and continue, but before he could two pairs of arms were wrapped around his body and were pulling him away from

Dustin.

"Mike! Jesus Christ, what the fuck is wrong with you?!"

"That piece of shit told El everything!" Mike screamed with rage, on the verge of delirium. "She fucking slapped me!"

"Okay, fine, but that's not Dustin's fault!" Will yelled, struggling to pin his friend's arm down. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the rest of them, Dustin was finding his own way off the ground. He lifted his hand to feel his jaw, where there was already a swollen bump and a lot of soreness. He tasted blood in his mouth and realized that he had bitten down on his tongue when he had fallen probably. And then he was on his feet again, having been sobered up from being punched in the fucking face.

He moved toward Mike and his two friends who were still yelling at one another, both of Mike's hands being restrained by the boys. Without hesitation, Dustin balled up his right fist and swung it upward right into his opponents sternum. Mike gasped and folded like a piece of paper, his mouth agape but with no air coming in or out. He rolled onto his side, sucking in stuttery and uneven breaths.

Lucas and Will stumbled back after witnessing Mike fall, both of them too stunned to even piece together a sentence. Max had been standing on the sidelines the whole time, observing the situation with wide eyes and thumping heart. It occurred to her that El was probably alone in the woods somewhere, so she took advantage of the ruckus and dashed toward the trees before anyone could see her.

"Dustin, calm the fuck down!" Lucas shouted, moving toward him with his arms raised.

"Piss off, Lucas," Dustin spat, and slapped his hands away only to be met with Will, who was standing in between him and Mike.

"Dustin, back off," he said, trying to sound intimidating. But he was nearly half a foot shorter than Dustin and was probably fifty pounds less, and both of them knew that. But all Dustin could focus on was the taste of coppery blood in his mouth and the pounding in his jaw, and how badly he wanted to give Mike what was coming to him.

Mike had positioned himself in such a way that he was facing away from the kerfuffle, and he still appeared to be balled up in the fetal position. Dustin shoved Will out of the way and he fell down, and he moved toward Mike. But when he got within a few feet, Mike sprang from the ground and plowed into Dustin head on. Between his height and Dustin's extra weight the two were fairly matched, but neither seemed to be able to overpower the other.

Just when it looked like Dustin had a stable hold on Mike's legs and was about to flip him over, Steve and Robin came charging out from the backdoor, yelling and screaming for them to stop. Neither of them paid any attention until Steve was right there and yanked them apart.

"Holy fuck!" Steve screeched, his voice an octave higher than usual. "What the fuck are you guys doing?!"

"He punched me in the fucking face for no fucking reason!" Dustin shouted, pointing an accusing finger at Mike.

"He told El about how I lied and Hopper could be alive, and she broke up with me! For real this time!" he screamed back, trying to hide his tears but failing. He was hoping that it was dark enough so that they wouldn't see, but he was not so lucky.

"What, are you fucking crying now?" Dustin mocked. "Fucking wimp. Are you sad that El isn't going to be able to suck you off anymore, or what?"

"*Shut up!*" Mike bellowed, and ran into Dustin and tacked him onto the ground like a football player. Then both of them were on the ground again, throwing blind punches and grabbing body parts with little success.

Steve was pushed back his breaking point and, taking advantage of his greatest strength, grabbed Mike by his shoulders and yanked him backward so hard his feet nearly left the ground. He placed himself in between the two panting teens and stretched his arms out to keep them apart.

"Dustin. Get the fuck in the house. Mike stay out here. Lucas, Will,

you guys split up. You can go wherever you want." Everyone was silent for a moment, before Dustin spat out another spew of blood onto the deck and walked into the house. Lucas and Will exchanged glances and decided who was going where without speaking. Lucas went in to join Dustin and Steve in the house, and Will stayed back with Mike and Robin.

Mike watched menacingly as Dustin disappeared into the house, followed by Steve and Lucas, who were both talking to one another, but Mike couldn't hear their exact words. As soon as the door closed, he finally let himself go and broke into another round of tears. He collapsed into the chair behind him and put his head in his hands, his shoulders shaking and chest heaving.

After taking a shaky breath in, he rubbed his face hard downward, and looked up to face Will, who was staring at him. "What happened?" he asked, looking worried for his friend.

Mike wiped his swollen eyes again, trying to not look too upset in front of Will, but he knew his efforts would be in vain. He stared at him. "El's mad at me. Really mad," he said. "That you lied? Or what you lied about?"

"Both," he said. "And I said some things that I shouldn't have."

"Like what?"

Mike stared into space, not knowing if he should tell him. "Just some stuff about Hopper," he settled with.

"Damn," he said, not knowing what else to respond with. It occurred to him that in not even twelve more hours he would have to go back to his house, where El would most certainly be. That would put him in awkward situation. His best friend had just been probably heart broken by some girl that was now living with him. He had never really considered the long term results of living with El; sure, he liked her (as a friend, of course) and was grateful for her doing everything that she had done for her friend group. But if the day that her and Mike ever broke up would one day come, what would he do? Just continue to live with the girl that Mike would undoubtedly hate? *I'll think about it when the time comes*, he thought.

"Look, I'm sure you guys will figure stuff out, Mike," he reasoned. "You did last time. She's just angry. Once she's cooled off, you guys will make up."

"Will, you don't understand," Mike cried out in despair. "She fucking slapped me. She slapped me in the fucking face!" he screamed. "She doesn't want anything to do with me anymore!"

"Mike that's bullcrap, and you know that. You guys are in love!"

"You don't know that," Mike huffed, burying his face back into his sweaty palms. Mike did love El. He knew that he did. But he had never been sure if El had loved him; he was too nervous to ask, and to worried to tell her that he loved her for fear of her not saying it back. But he was sure that she didn't, or never would, love him now.

"Not anymore," Mike said, and got out of his chair. He started to walk toward the front of the house.

"Where are you going?" Will asked exasperatedly, throwing his arms out and letting them fall at his sides. "It's fucking dark, Mike. You can't walk home." He was growing frustrated, Mike was acting like an idiot.

"I'm not planning on going home. I just need to get out of here," he sighed, zipping up his hoodie up a little bit tighter.

"So you're just gonna walk around on the road?"

"Yeah. And don't try to stop me."

Will stared at him, upset and frustrated. But he knew that no matter how hard he tried, Mike was not going to budge. He knew him well; he was stubborn, bordering on arrogant at times, and if he wanted to do this then that was what he was going to do.

"Fine," he muttered. "Just... try to stay safe, okay?"

"Uh-huh," he mumbled, and turned to walk toward the front walk.

Mike found himself walking along the dirt road by Mirkwood. He was getting hit with waves of flash, but not the good kind. This was the

exact place Will had disappeared over a year ago. This was the place where him, Lucas, and Dustin had ventured out to find their friend. They were just twelve years back then. Now it had been two years, and so much had changed. But was it for the better or for the worse?

He had met El; the most important person in his life. The girl who he had fallen in love with within less than a week, the girl that he had waited for for nearly a year to come back, the girl that he made spent hours making out with every day for the last seven months. That was good. There was also no doubt that the experience had certainly brought him and the rest of the guys closer together, but at what cost? A large one, clearly.

Hopper was dead; the town's chief of police was no longer around. Billy was dead. Bob was dead. Barbara and other kids from last year were dead. So many people had died. The town had been touched with tragedy. Twice. The mall was burned down. His life for a year and a half had felt like a dream that he would never wake up from.

He inhaled deeply and tried to collect his thoughts. What was he going to do with El? Maybe he should just back off for a little bit. It wouldn't help for him to go running at her now, he would just get slapped. His best chance would be for him to wait for at least a day, and then go back to her. If he explained everything again, with more detail, when they were both more calm, she would understand, right? There was no reason for her not too. And for all he knew, perhaps she had already thought about it and realized that he was right.

Now that she knew about Hopper, she would be waiting for him to come back for the rest of her life. And she had lost her powers, so there was no way for her to go into the void to find him. If she had had her powers, than that would have been the first thing to do. But no; they didn't have that option.

So she would be stuck in a pit, a pit of hope that she would never get out of. And all because of fucking Dustin. Fuck. He felt his blood start pumping harder as soon as he thought of him. God damn it. Everything was going fine. Him and El probably could have been having sex in the bedroom by this time. They had been drunk and happy, and that time they had been having before the fireworks started happening had been... magical. There bare skin pressed

against each other, moving and grinding together, being able to feel and see her naked front had been... fucking beautiful.

And now he wasn't sure if he wasn't sure if he was ever going to experience that again. Would he ever hear her laugh or see her smile? Would he ever get to answer any of her questions about the world? Would he ever get to hug her and breathe in her smell and run his hands through her hair? Would they ever make out, or even exchange little pecks on the lips when they said hi or good-bye? Would they ever move forward in their relationship?

He didn't know.

And that's it. I hope you guys didn't find it too upsetting, but I assure you, things end well for them. (As you saw in the show.) But just know that there is a bumpy road ahead. As always drop a review, they encourage me a lot and let me know that you guys are liking what you see! Take it easy guys, love you all 3

PS. I apologize for any typos, didn't want to reread everything again. Just wanted to get this as soon as possible XD

23. Chapter 23

Hey guys, it's back! I tried to get this chapter out quickly, because I don't know what school holds until Christmas break finally rolls around. But I can guess that end-of-semester projects will take up a lot of time. So here you guys go; brace yourself, this is a tough one. The next few chapters are going to have this taste, for the most part. I hope you enjoy :)

Guest 1: Well, I can see why you may think that, but I assure you that I have a different plan. I'm not exactly sure about the details, but I can tell you that it will not be a one sided apology. Thanks for being so civil, though :)

Luna0603: Thank you so much! It was important to me to get the fight just right. I'm glad that it did justice. I'm loving your work with TTWAS, btw. Can't wait for the next chapter :)

Guest 2: Thank you! Brace yourself for more pain though, haha

Vader115: I hope you're at least somewhat happy with these chapters, haha! Enjoy this one :)

Bb7979: Thanks! I hope you like this chapter.

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: I'm glad I was able to get that type of emotion out! I wanted that fight to be as horrible as possible (I'm evil, I know). In regards to what will happen to her, guess we will have to see...

Guest 3: Thank you so much! It's good that some people are more nonsensical, haha. you'll be glad to know that, yes, I do plan on diverting from the cliché that we saw in season 3. I hope you like this chapter!

El crashed into her room as quickly as she could and collapsed onto the bed, exhausted and emotionally empty. She had ran all the way from Steve's to her house, and she had been crying the whole time. Her hair was blown in all directions and her elbows and knees were scraped because she had fallen a couple times; navigating through

the dark forest had not been easy. Her eyes felt dry, like the tear ducts had been drained so much they were like a desert.

She was cold too; the temperature had drastically dropped, and she had not dressed to be outside at nearly three o'clock in the morning. She glanced at the digital clock on her nightstand and read the time. *Three-three-two*, she saw. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. She had been quiet coming in, so she wouldn't be having to deal with Joyce later in the night. It was just her and her thoughts.

It seemed like the running had sort of distracted her from what was actually going on, because as soon as she had flopped onto her mattress everything seemed to be rushing back at her. It made her feel sick, like she was going to throw up. All the things he had said. All the things that *she* had said... she didn't know which one made her more upset.

Mike had said all those things about Hopper. His face flashed through her mind, replaying the moment over and over and over again until it felt like she wanted to tear her hair out. *He'll never come back. He lied to you about everything*, he had said to her. To some degree, what he had said was true. Hopper had lied about her to a lot of things, but they had moved past that. And since then, she had come to realize that Hopper was probably right for keeping her away for that long. He only did it because he wanted to protect her. The Bad Men were looking for her, and Hopper needed to protect her. He fed her, gave her a home, taught her things... he was just being a good Dad.

A Dad that was gone.

Or not. The recent development had recently thrown a monkey wrench into the mix. Mike had said that they kept it from her to help her, but she didn't see how that helped her at all. She felt lied to and deceived. She had been lied to her entire life. To lie to her about something like this... it was infuriating.

What if Hopper was somewhere trapped, looking for her, waiting to be rescued? Waiting to be found? What if he was in the Upside-Down, or Russia? She didn't even know where Russia was, but she knew that it was a different country across the ocean. Far away. Her mind continued to flood with thoughts in ideas, each one coming and

going so fast she could barely pick them out individually. Would she be able to find Hopper if she went into the void?

She crawled out of her lying position on her bed and went to her dresser. She pulled out the door where she kept her socks and underwear and gazed on the long black cloth. It had been sitting there, untouched, for over a month. What was the reason for her not using it? She didn't even know herself. Perhaps it was fear for what would happen. Fear for if it would even work. She knew that her powers were gone, but part of her was still in denial. It was better to just not try to use them and imagine that they were still there then to try to use them and find out that they were truly gone.

It was still unknown if they would ever even come back; it was not like she could go see a doctor about this sort of thing. She would never get any advice on this matter, and it made her frustrated. As much as she didn't want to admit it, her powers were a huge part of who she was. They made her feel safe and protected, and they allowed her to make sure that her friends were safe and protected, which was even more important. And for the last month, she had felt so exposed and insecure and vulnerable to whatever threats that could be out there.

Now was not the time to second guess herself. She had to know if Hopper was out there. And even if it didn't work, what would be that worst that could happen?

Grabbing the dark piece of fabric, she padded back toward her bed and sat down with a loud and nervous sigh. As she tied it around her eyes, she found hands and fingers to be shaking. Her heart was pounding. Why was she so nervous?

After her vision had completely disappeared, she forced her hands to stay still and folded them in her lap. She sat up farther on her head and crossed her legs, trying to clear her mind. It was difficult; the argument with Mike was still flashing through her mind. But for the sake of her Dad, she forced all of that out for now and focused on absolutely nothing.

She didn't know how long she sat like that; it could have been minutes, it could have been hours. Maybe Joyce was going to knock

on her door any minute and drag her out for breakfast before she even made any progress.

But progress was not being made. She sat there, staring into nothing, but not ever feeling

the familiar sensation of a thin sheet of water in her toes, or temperature-less pit of nothing. No echoes of familiar voices around her, no figures or objects. Her expression became strained as she pictured Hopper in her mind as clearly as she could. The cloth started to dampen with her tears as she tried to recall experiences that would jumpstart her powers; she found that in times of need they would always protect her, no matter what.

Finding her in the woods. Cleaning the cabin. Dancing to Jim Croce. Playing cards and board games late at night. Watching old Westerns. Seeing Miami Vice for the first time. Making Eggo extravaganzas in the morning for breakfast. All the hugs and kisses on the forehead. All the times he smiled at her and said, "it's gonna be okay, kid."

But nothing came.

She tore off the blindfold and bit on her lips as hard as she could to withhold the gut wrenching scream of frustration that she wanted to let out so badly. But she didn't want to wake Joyce. She didn't want to be a nuisance.

Instead, she threw the piece of fabric across the room and crawled into her bed and buried herself deep into the sheets.

And cried.

Never in her life and she felt like this before. It felt like she was on the verge of throwing up, but not from being sick. At least not the kind of sick that you usually think of. The kind of sick you get after watching a loved one die right in front of you. Because right now, that's what it felt like. Recalling all of those experiences with Hopper and hoping to see him, only to be spat on in return and be greeted by her empty, lonesome room was like reliving his death all over again. Except this time, it felt she had watched him die.

She had no shoulder to cry on except her own. Burying her face into the sheets, she tried to force herself to stop, but she couldn't. The tears and anger and hurt and frustration and fear and sadness continued to pour out of her like a damn with a gaping hole in it. She felt paralyzed. Like there was nothing more that could happen that could possibly make her feel worse than she already did.

All the felt was cold.

Mike fished the spare key out from the bushes in the back garden and slid it into the keyhole of the back basement door. Turning the key, the lock clicked and he pushed the door open and stepped inside. The cool basement felt amazing in contract with the hot August evening that he been trudging through for nearly an hour. It had been a strange experience walking down Mirkwood by himself for so long. It gave him a lot of time to think about what happened.

Yet he had not made any decision about what he was going to do. It seemed like, rather than trying to figure out how to mend things with El, he had spent the better part of his walk simply replaying the fight in his mind. Over and over and over until he felt dizzy. He dropped his backpack as his feet and collapsed onto the soft sofa and closed his eyes. Under normal circumstances, his exhaustion would have caused him to pass out within seconds. But his brain was too alive for him to even think about sleep.

So he lay there on the couch, his feet hanging off the edge. He reached up to rub his eyes, that were sore and dried out from all the tears that he had shed since he left the house. What was he going to do?

His mind had had some time to cool down a little bit since he left the house. His initial anger had subsided slightly, and now he was also thinking about Dustin, and how he had punched him in the face. With a grimace, he looked down at his knuckles that had blood caked on them. Probably from Dustin's nose. He had landed a pretty good hit there during their brawl. He heaved himself off the couch and dragged his feet to the bathroom and closed the doors when he got in. He gazed at himself in the mirror.

He looked like shit, to say the least. His eyes were bloodshot and red

and wet, and he had a cut just above his temple that had split open and blood had leaked from the wound down his face and onto his cheek. Some had gotten on his clothes, which he was going to have to explain to his Mom. He supposed there wasn't any need to mince words with her; he could just tell her flat out what happened. With the exception of El, of course. He would just tell her that him and Dustin got into a fight, and that he didn't want to talk about it. That would work, right?

He turned the tap on and rubbed the cold water over his hands. It stung slightly, but it felt like nothing in comparison to everything else that was going on. After cupping his hands together and letting some water accumulate in his palms, he leaned down and dunked his face in the miniature pool. He kept his face in there for a moment before rising out and blowing some water droplets out of his mouth. There was still some dried up blood that was stuck near his gash, so he raised his right hand and rubbed around the spot tenderly, wincing at every small movement.

Once he had finished cleaning up all the blood, he looked in the mirror again, but he still looked terrible. Just less bloody. The bags under his eyes were very pronounced; it was high time that he went to bed, but he still had some thinking to do. He had to put together a course of action about how he was going to pull everything back together.

Mending his relationship with Dustin would be easy, he guessed. Just so long as he apologized. Even he could see that they were both wrong to do what he did. Punching him was definitely out of line. But him getting so drunk that he couldn't control what he was saying was also out of line. He was sure that Dustin would see the sense in that.

After all, men operated on logic, and women operated on feelings.

But did Dustin really deserve to be forgiven so easily for what he had done? He could very well have completely ruined their relationship, and because of what? A bottle of whiskey and his own irresponsibility. He shook his head and decided to think about it tomorrow.

He started getting a sense of déjà vu from when him and Lucas got in that fight way back in seventh grade when El had used her powers to mess up their compasses. He smiled. It was a stupid fight, and of course it had happened because they were looking for their missing best friend, but it represented something more. When they were younger, it seemed so much smaller. It was just the Demogorgon. Now, everything was so much bigger.

And he remembered how El had thrown Lucas off him to protect him, because she cared about him. Even after only a few days of knowing one another, their bond had become undeniable. But right now, it seemed to be slipping through his fingers like grains of sand, and he was helpless to stop it. Everything that they had built together for so long was fading away.

Mike was too empty to start crying again, so he just sat there on the couch. He sat there for a while longer doing nothing in particular before drifting into an uneasy sleep.

It was six o'clock in the morning when Will opened the front door and stepped in his house. He had been walking for a long time and had not gotten a minute of sleep the entire night, and it felt like he could collapse on the ground any minute. His knees and eyelids felt heavy, but still he held on, just long enough for him to get to his own bedroom (where Jonathan was absent from) before he flopped on the mattress. He threw off his clothes and got under the sheets in just his boxers because he was too lazy to do anything else.

He groaned when he realized that he had not made sure if El had gotten back safely. With a stifled sigh, he dragged himself out from underneath the covers and tiptoed down the hall toward El's bedroom. Opening the door carefully, he peered inside and saw the crack of early morning light shining on her sleeping figure. He exhaled in relief knowing that she had gotten home alright.

After settling back into his own bed, he pondered the events that had occurred. His best friend was at war with his step-sister and other best friend (even though he considered Mike to be his number one best friend). That raised a lot of problems. For one, his two really good friends hated each other right now, and being friends with two people who are against one another never ended well for anyone. In

fact, the same went for him and El. He considered himself to be a lot closer to El now, since they had that conversation a week or so ago. And of course, he was stuck in the middle of all of it.

He supposed there was really no single person to pin all the blame on; from what he had gathered last night, mistakes were made on both sides. But that also meant apologies would have to be made on both sides would have to be made too. He doubted that the Dustin-Mike fight would be a long standing issue; the Party (the original Party, before El and Max) had been best friends for years. It was likely that they would shake on it within a week.

El and Mike, however... that seemed like it could be a problem.

Will couldn't even remember the last time he had seen Mike emotional over anything. He had heard from his Mom that the moment him and El were reunited at his house when he was possessed had been very intense. From the way she talked about it, maybe these two events were comparable. But he still doubted that it could have surpassed this. He had been hysterical when he came back. Not to mention his hand was all bloody, even before he had hit Dustin. Did that mean he hit El? No, there was no way he could have done that.

Mike had said El had even slapped him in the face. He shuddered at the thought. If she had had her powers, he would have been a lot worse off, for sure. But instead she had just hit him. Was that better or worse?

He was willing to bet that it was worse. In all honesty, he just felt bad for both of them. He felt bad for Mike because he had only been trying to do what was best for El; he did have to admit, her not knowing about the truth about Hopper probably would have given her a lot more closure and happiness. And it looked like that goal was being achieved. From what he had seen, El had been doing very well (considering everything). And now everything had just been flipped around and turned upside down for her. In many respects, it was a good idea for Mike and the rest of them to have kept that truth from her.

But on the other hand, had it even been fair to lie to El for all that

time. There had to be some line to draw at a certain point. It couldn't possibly be ethical to just lie and lie to someone just to preserve happiness. Then it would just be an illusion, false happiness. And that kind of happiness could be broken in an instant, as they all knew from what had happened. If she had known in the beginning, maybe it would have been better that way.

There was no way to know now. What was done was done. And all Will knew was that he was feeling very confused about the entire situation. His thoughts became hazy as his mind lulled off into a dreamless slumber.

Dustin woke up to a throbbing headache. It felt like a drum was being pounded in his brain, hammering against his skull a thousand times a minute. He groaned and looked around. After finding himself on the couch in Steve's living room, he flopped his head back down onto the pillow and rubbed his face. *So this is what it feels like to be hung over.*

Nice. This is exactly what he needed right now. He suddenly heard footsteps approaching him from the other side of the room. His head felt too heavy to even turn around, so he waited until the noise had stopped before opening his eyes. "Hey, Dusty-bun," Steve greeted mockingly. "How you feeling?"

"Like shit," Dustin grumbled, still keeping his eyes closed. "It feels like a native tribe is performing a ritual inside my fucking head."

"Ah," Steve sympathized. "The tribes. I know what you mean," he nodded slowly, looking at him.

"I can't go home like this," Dustin cried out in distress. "This is a fucking nightmare."

Steve snorted. "A hangover is the least of your problems right now, Henderson."

"What do you mean?"

Steve rolled his eyes. He was getting flashbacks to Tina's party and Nancy getting drunk. "What do you remember from last night?"

He scrunched his eyes together and tried to recall the events that had transpired. It was hazy. "I remember having some shots," he began, sounding unsure of himself. "I remember talking with everyone, watching some fireworks... I got into some fight with Mike over something... I can't remember what. And that's it."

Steve raised his eyebrows and clicked his tongue. "Fuck," he murmured under his teeth. "This isn't good."

Dustin's heartbeat started to accelerate. What had happened? It had to have been something that involved Mike. "Is it about Mike? It's about Mike, isn't it?"

"It's about a lot of things, Henderson."

"Just cut the crap and tell me what happened last night, Steve!" Dustin's tone of voice sharpened, he was growing impatient. He needed to know what had happened. And if he had done.

"You blabbed about Hopper possibly being alive to El," Steve disclosed. "El found out that Mike lied about it. They got into a huge fight, Mike hates you for blabbing, and everything has just gone to shit."

There we go! As always, send me a review, it's very gratifying to see how many people are enjoying this fic. And if you've been hanging around for a little while, it's always nice to see my number of followers increase! I'll try to get the next chapter out soon, but no promises. Take it easy and take care guys :)

24. Chapter 24

Hello guys, welcome back! Sorry for the wait on this chapter, I've been busy with a lot of other stuff. I don't really have much to say other than thank you for last chapter's reviews, I'm glad to see you guys are feeling the way that I want you guys to feel reading these chapters. I hope you all enjoy this one!

39CluesStrangerThings-Star: Haha, I'll take that as a good thing! I'm glad you're enjoying it. I appreciate all of your reviews!

Vader115: Yeahhh, we are gonna be dealing with a lost of angst in the next couple chapters. Hopefully this chapter fixes some of it though :)

Luna0603: Yeah, I'm doing my best to balance how everyone is feeling. This story is Mike-and-El centered, but there are other characters that I like to think about too. The good news is, the mending process sort of begins with this chapter, so let's see how that goes! Also you're welcome, I'm looking forward to the next chapter of TTWAS.

El woke up to the smell of pancake batter and bacon. Despite herself, she smiled at the aroma. Either Joyce knew that something was wrong, or she was just lucky. Drawn by the scent, she crawled out of her bed and slowly went toward the kitchen. She still felt half asleep. On her way she passed Will's bedroom and saw that he was still out cold. She assumed that he had not had too much sleep. She quietly closed his door and continued toward the source of the mouth-water smell.

When Joyce saw her turn the corner she gave her a warm smile. El smiled back and nodded shyly. "Hey, sweetie," she greeted. "You got home early last night?"

El was confused for a brief moment. *Oh*. She had gotten home at nearly three o'clock last night, but Joyce thought she had just walked home really early. Should she tell her the truth about really happened? No, not yet.

"Yes," she lied smoothly. "We woke up kind of early."

"Why's that?" Joyce asked with a raised eyebrow, wondering why a bunch of teens would

choose to wake up early when they could have slept in.

El had to think fast. "We ended up going to bed early, I guess. We were tired from swimming in his pool." She was surprised even at herself with how clean her fib was. Joyce didn't even blink.

"Ah," she replied. "Yeah, swimming definitely drains you, doesn't it?" El nodded. "Well, I made some blueberry pancakes. I hope they're good, I've never really made them before," she admitted with a chuckle.

"Thank you," El replied politely, and sat down in one of the chairs at the table and grabbed the cutlery from either side of her plate.

"Did you and Will walk home together?" Joyce asked.

Shit. "Yes, we did," El replied after a moment's hesitation. She would have to inform Will of the so they could keep consistent. "I guess he was more tired than me," she added with a shrug. Joyce silently nodded and sat down beside her, tucking into her own pancakes.

"Is everything okay?" she asked. "You seem... off."

"Off?" El repeated quizzically. She was not quite sure what she meant by that.

"Not right," Joyce clarified. "Is anything bothering you?"

El paused. Was she being that obvious? Or was Joyce just really good with this sort of thing? It might have been a combination of both. Either way, she still wasn't ready to disclose what had happened at Steve's. "Is everything okay with Mike?"

That snapped her out of her trance. "Yes," she replied automatically, almost too much so.

"Are you sure? El, you can talk to-

"I said it's fine," El snapped harshly, flicking her head to meet Joyce's concerned gaze. El cleared her throat, kicking herself for being so defensive. "Sorry," she mumbled, not meeting her eyes. She felt awkward. "I guess I'm just... tired or something."

Joyce pursed her lips and nodded, taking the hint that El didn't want to talk, and that something was clearly on her mind.

And she was willing to bet anything that it had something to do with Mike.

Joyce watched El shovel the last bits of pancakes into her mouth before disappearing into her room. She called out thanks on her way down the hall, to which Joyce replied with "you're welcome." Once she had disappeared out of earshot, Joyce sighed and placed her head in her hands. Great. The last thing she needed was drama between El and Mike right around the time she was planning to tell her about the move. She had found a house in a suburb in Chicago for a good price. It had 3 bedrooms, meaning Jonathan and Will would have to share and her and El could have separate rooms. But Jonathan was going to leave for school soon, so Will would probably have his own room most of the time.

Two bathrooms, a decent enough yard, good neighbourhood, it was all perfect. But she knew that breaking the news to El would be difficult, to say the least. She had to wait for the perfect time to tell her, preferably a time where she didn't seem upset about something already.

Oh, well. The supposed the time would come sooner or later. Until then, she would just have to be ready until it did.

Dustin paced frantically around the Harrington living room, clawing his fingers through his wild morning hair. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck..." he kept repeating under his breath.

"Saying one word over and over again isn't gonna solve your problem, man," Steve pointed out as he put another spoonful of Cheerios into his mouth.

"Thank you, Steve," Dustin mocked sarcastically. "I'm just thinking,"

he muttered defensively.

"With your mouth or your brain?" he asked.

"Shut up," Dustin shot back, and then muttered another slew of cuss words under his breath after that Steve couldn't quite catch.

"What's the plan, Einstein?" Steve questioned.

"You know, I'd really appreciate some ideas here, you fuckin' moron," Dustin snapped.

"Nah, I'd rather just eat breakfast and watch you make a fool of yourself," Steve laughed.

"Fuck you too," Dustin gave him the finger. "What if I just go talk to Mike? How bad could that go?"

"Have you seen yourself? The reason why you have a bruise on your face is because he socked you in the head! Do you really wanna risk going to his house?"

"If Lucas is with me, then maybe," Dustin reasoned.

"Would Lucas go with you?"

"I'd have to ask him."

"How are you gonna do that?"

"I'll go to his house."

"Now?"

"No, tomorrow."

"What?"

"I was being sarcastic, fucknut!" Dustin exploded. "Yes, today! I have to handle this as soon as I can!"

"Okay, okay, Jesus," Steve tutted, rolling his eyes. "You wanna ride there?"

"Yes."

As Dustin and Steve neared the Sinclair household, Dustin found himself getting increasingly nervous. What if Lucas was as mad at him as much as Mike certainly was? "Yo, Steve," Dustin said. "Do you know of Lucas is also pissed off at me?"

"I have no idea," Steve replied honestly, keeping his eyes trained on the road. "For your sake, I hope so."

Dustin sighed and rested his head on his hand, and propped his elbow on the window sill of the passenger side. He had been beating himself up all morning about what he had did. Sure, he didn't initially agree with Mike's decision to keep the information away from El, but there were two things wrong with that. One, Mike knew her better than anyone. And two, even if he hadn't agreed, he had promised to keep it a secret.

And just because of some stupid alcohol, he had jeopardized everything. He made a mental note to remember to keep things in check the next time he drank, if he ever did. This hangover was making him rethink that.

"How's the hangover?" Steve asked.

"Killer," Dustin deadpanned, closing his eyes and breathing out of his nose slowly. He was in the process of mentally psyching himself up when he felt the car lurch to a stop.

"Alright, brother," Steve announced. "We're here." Dustin opened the car door reluctantly and eyed Steve.

"Thanks for the ride, man," he said and stuck his hand out. Steve grabbed it as if they were linking heads to do an arm wrestle, and gave it a shake.

"Take care," he nodded. Dustin swung the door closed and jogged up the walk to Lucas's front door. He jammed his hands in his pockets nervously before knocking lightly on the wood, part of him hoping that no one would come to answer it. Unfortunately, his small hope was not to be realized when he heard some fumbling through an

open upstairs window. Hushed whispers and a lot of cursing could be heard, and he recognized the other voice in the house to be Max. He rolled his eyes. He had been hoping to catch Luas by himself. He didn't know what kind of drama Max had with him.

The house nearly seemed to shake as he heard Lucas bound down the stairs, and he was about to call out to him that it was him, not his Mom, but then the door swung open and he was standing face to face with a disheveled looking Dustin. They met eyes for half a second and Lucas sighed loudly. "God, dammit, Dustin," he muttered and turned around it. "Max, it's Dustin! Not my Mom!"

"Fuck!"

Dustin wrinkled his nose. "Did I interrupt something?" he asked sarcastically.

"Shut up," Lucas replied, rubbing his eyes with exasperation. He looked straight at his friend. "What's up?"

Dustin analyzed his face momentarily. He wasn't getting any negative vibes from him, so that gave him hope. Maybe Lucas would be willing to help with the problem. "Are you mad at me?"

Lucas hesitated. "Do you know what happened last night?" he questioned him.

"Yeah," Dustin responded, wincing at even the thought that everything Steve told was true. "Steve told me. Was it that bad?"

"Yeah," Lucas said with a deep exhale, cracking his knuckles one at a time. It was something he did when he was uneasy.

"So, uh," Dustin stuttered. "Are you mad at me? 'Cause I might need some help making things up with Mike," he admitted.

"Yeah, no, of course," Lucas said immediately, placing a hand on Dustin's shoulder. "You just made a mistake. Don't worry, the Party always shakes."

"Do you remember what happened between you and Mike two years ago?" Dustin asked incredulously. "Are you really sure that's gonna

happen?"

"Okay, but that was when we were both mad at each other. This is one sided. I'm sure it will be fine."

Dustin clicked his tongue and rubbed his hands together. "Can I come in for a bit, I haven't eaten breakfast?"

"Yeah, sure." Lucas agreed, and stepped backward to let Dustin through. He nodded at him and kicked off his shoes on the mat at the door and stepped in. The house was nice and cool in contrast to outside, and he felt like the sweat on his body was almost disappearing. "Fuck, that's nice," he sighed.

Max's voice came from down the hall, and Dustin could hear her footsteps drawing closer. "Lucas, did you tell Dustin to lea-" She rounded the corner and came face to face with the two of them wearing nothing but sweat pants and a bra. "Oh, Jesus *Christ*!" she yelled and turned on a dime and made an angry beeline back to Lucas's room. "God damn it," she called from down the hall. "Thank's Dustin!" she yelled sarcastically.

Dustin furrowed his brow. "Are you sure that I'm not interrupting anything?" he joked.

Lucas shrugged. "Meh," he said. "This is more important. I, um... might have been going down on her before you came."

Dustin coughed loudly. "Ah," he replied, not knowing what else to respond with. "Interesting."

"Hey, just 'cause you're dating someone who lives across the country and can't do anything with her doesn't mean it's weird for me to do stuff with mine, who lives within walking distance!" he laughed.

"Yeah, no, I'm not making fun or anything," Dustin backpedalled. He was relieved that Lucas was joking with him, it proved that he wasn't lying when he said that he wasn't mad at him.

"You want cereal?"

"Sure."

Dustin watched him pour the two of them bowls of some sort of raisin bran cereal. He wasn't a huge fan of raisins, but he needed something hardy to get him through the day. He poured some milk in once Lucas had brought the two bowls to the table, and took his spoon and crammed in as much food as he could in one bite.

"Hungry?" Lucas asked.

Dustin chewed and swallowed the food, and tapped his spoon on the side of the bowl in thought. "It's weird," he began. "I'm hungover and I feel like shit, and part of me wants to throw up at the thought of food. But the other part is hungry as fuck. And right now that side is winning," he said as he put another spoonful back into his mouth.

"Fascinating," Lucas deadpanned. "I can't believe you had that much to drink," he murmured.

"Don't remind me," Dustin replied. "How's Mike doing?"

Lucas licked his lips. "If he's anything like he was last night? Not good."

"Fuck." He shoveled another bite into his mouth and chewed quickly. "I hope he's doing better than."

Mike woke up on the couch in his basement to nothing in particular. It might have been a dream, but he didn't know. For a moment, he couldn't even remember what had happened last night. He had no idea why he was sleeping the basement, or why he was still fully clothed, or anything.

But then it all came to him at once. The fight, the argument with El, punching Dustin, walking home semi-drunk. He groaned loudly and rolled over on his other side so that his head was buried into the backrest of the sofa. After squeezing his eyes painfully tight for a few moments, he rolled back over to gaze at the digital clock on the side table a few feet away from him. It read twelve-thirty-eight.

As if on queue, his stomach growled loudly. He realized that he hadn't eaten anything in over twelve hours, and figured it was high time that he got himself something to eat.

And that's how he found himself up in the kitchen feeling groggy and depressed popping in waffles in the toaster. Fuck, he couldn't even get breakfast without being reminded of El. It had to be Eggos. Damn it. There was nothing else in the house to have for breakfast at that moment anyway; his Mom was grocery shopping now, according to the note that had been stuck on the fridge.

He sat at the table and mulled over things in his head. He had no idea what to do, truly; he had never gotten in such a huge fight with one of the guys; but he knew that it wouldn't last before. Dustin was part of the Party. He was friends with all of his friends. And he knew that no matter what, no matter what kind of argument or fight they could ever have, nothing could deny the bond between the group of boys. He imagined that Dustin felt the same way too. They would shake, and then the four of them could focus on the real problem: El.

Sure, El was part of the Party too. So in theory, she would be the same case as Dustin.

They would both realize that there existed an irrefutable bond between them, and that would lead them to shake under the presumption that no matter what kind of shit happened, they would always have each other's back, no matter what.

But of course, El was a girl.

And girl's operated on feelings, not logic.

So then there was a problem. Obviously, El did not believe Mike's lie was justified. She

thought he was an idiot and a horrible person in nearly every way, unless the previous night had just been a show. Which it might have been, but it felt too real. Whatever it was, he had to figure it out soon to plan his next course of action. Which would have been a lot easier to do with the help of his friends. The guys could probably offer some more insight, some more ideas, or literally *anything* to help him.

This was the exact reason why it felt like a godsend when he looked up and saw Dustin and Lucas walking up his driveway. He let out a deep breath of relief and got up from his seat at the dining table

quickly, leaving the semi-eaten waffles in their place. The door was being opened before Dustin and Lucas had even gotten there. Mike could have sworn that he saw a look of panic flash across Dustin's face for a moment, but then it was back to being neutral. He waited for them to get a little closer before he spoke.

"What's up guys?" he greeted casually. Lucas waved in return but didn't say anything, but instead turned toward Dustin expectantly, who scratched the back of his head awkwardly. He fiddled with the brim of his baseball cap.

"Uh, you got a minute to talk, Mike?" he asked. Mike furrowed his brow and analyzed Dustin's face. He seemed very upset and stressed out, and he could see the marks that he had left on his face. And based on the look of Dustin's face, he guessed he had seen the same on his. It was making for a very awkward situation.

"Yeah, sure. Come in guys," he invited them, stepping to the side and holding the door open. Both boys nodded and kicked their footwear off on the welcome mat. They then congregated on the living room, where they all sat down. Lucas again looked at Dustin.

"Look, Mike..." Dustin began. "I'm, uh... I'm really sorry about last night. I shouldn't have done anything I that I did. I got really drunk and it wasn't a good idea."

"You're right, but I-"

"Hold on, I'm not done yet," Dustin cut him off and held his hand up. "I was stupid and made the wrong decision. And I also said some things that I shouldn't have, about Hopper to El. Even after I promised you that I wouldn't. And then when you got mad at me, which you reasonably did, and hit me, I just started punching you back." Mike stared blankly at Dustin, shocked by how apologetic he was being.

"I'm sorry, Mike," he said sincerely, looking him in the eye as he did so. "I'm sorry that I fucked up so bad. But I'll tell you right now, I'll do everything I can to fix up whatever problems you're having with El. I promise."

Mike took a second to process everything that Dustin had said before answering. The fact that Dustin had been so one sided and nice about this made him feel incredibly grateful. If he was honest, he was expecting at least a little bit of disagreement, maybe some argument about something. It wasn't like Dustin to be willing to accept *all* the blame for something.

"Thanks, Dustin, but it's not all your fault. I did some dumb stuff to that night. I should have never hit you. I overreacted. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I deserved it."

"No, you didn't." Dustin opened his mouth to protest, but Mike stuck his hand out across the seating area. "Rule of law. I drew first blood." Dustin blew air out of his nose in amusement. "Shake?"

"Shake."

Alright, so that's chapter 23 done! I'll try to get chapter 24 out as soon as I can, but I cannot make any promises. As always, please a review! I love to read them and hear your thoughts on this story. Also motivates me to work more, haha. One more thing, I have a YouTube channel where I have made some Stranger Things Edits (two, to be exact.) I'd love it if you guys could check it out! Here's the link: [channel/UCWZA3z8f9GSfHJYr1SSNV1Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWZA3z8f9GSfHJYr1SSNV1Q)